

A
**FIERY LADY'S
ACCIDENTAL
AFFAIR**
**LUCY
LANGTON**

A Fiery Lady's Accidental Affair

A REGENCY ROMANCE NOVEL

LUCY LANGTON

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Introduction

Chapter 1

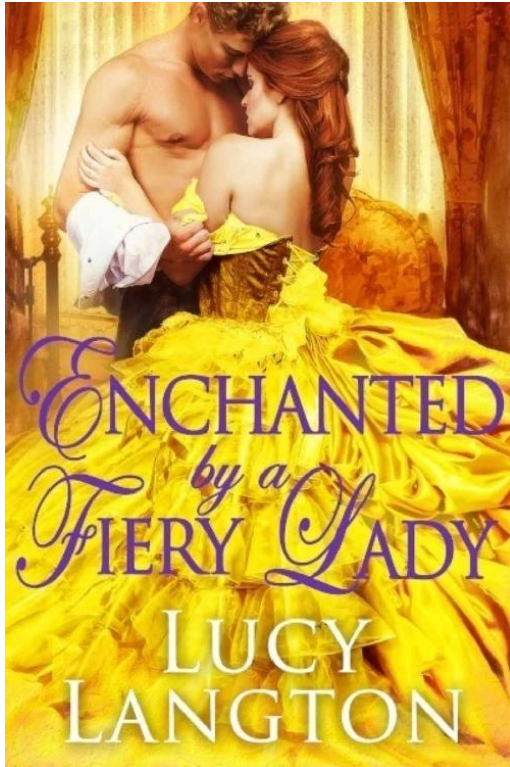
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A Fiery Lady's Accidental Affair

Introduction

Alone in the world with her only relative being a patronizing sister, Alicia Ramsbury feels trapped in London's high society. Even though this is her safe, familiar environment, a part of her is missing. While she is desperately trying to find herself in a place far away from home, she ends up in distress, when her carriage is violently wrecked. Thankfully a vigorous man appears to rescue her and she instantly knows that accepting the seductive stranger's offer for temporary hospitality is her only option. However, little did she know that the most passionate and fulfilling chapter of her life was about to begin...

Laurence Gillingham has always been a fierce young man, known for his love for the countryside and his roots. Being a farmer and having spent all his life close to nature, he appreciates rural living more than anything else. Will his peaceful and isolated life change after hosting the high-society lady that fate threw in his arms? Laurence will soon realize how much the world of London high-society collides with his rural retreat... Could Alison be the woman that will finally stimulate the mind and hidden desires of the distant Laurence?

When Laurence and Alicia come closer than they could ever imagine, they realise they may have found their missing halves in each other. However, they are struggling to leave their prejudice behind and they soon find themselves torn between love and social status. Alicia

should now decide whether she is willing to sacrifice all she has held dear for a lifetime of incomparable bliss and lust. Is love enough to keep these two passionate lovers together against all odds? Do they have the courage to overcome themselves and surrender to their deepest desires?

Chapter 1

An Unlikely Rescuer

The English countryside in the full flower of summer rolled by outside the carriage window. It was a veritable explosion of warm, glorious life. Songbirds darted to and fro as they sang their merry songs, and over the steady hoofbeats of the horses came the cheery calls of frogs and the hum of bumblebees dipping in and out of irises and wild roses.

Somewhere just on the other side of the shady row of elms that whistled in the gentle breeze, there was a babbling brook running alongside the highway. Overhead the sky was a rich, Pacific blue, dotted with tiny white clouds like cotton bobbing in the firmament.

But despite all the pomp and pageantry of the British summertime that flew by her carriage, Alicia Ramsbury had only one thing on her mind:

Only another few hours until I can be back in my own blessed bed.

“Oh, it is such a jolly day, isn’t it, Miss Alicia?” chirped her maid, Jenny, in that wretchedly good-humoured way of hers.

“Hmm, yes,” Alicia murmured in reply.

Silence passed between them as the yews and hawthorns rushed by in

a blur of verdant green. Alicia took in a breath, trying to ignore the smell as much as she could, and breathed it out again. She pushed away the sights and sounds of all that nature, bringing her thoughts again back to pleasanter things.

I hope Mister Wentworth has put clean linens on the bed already, she thought, a faint smile coming to her full, pink lips. I fancy I shall slip into the sheets the moment I walk through the door and then rise for an early supper before retiring right back to bed for the night. She could picture everything just as she had left it not three weeks before: her novel on the nightstand; her full, luxurious pillow fluffed just so; the deliciously warm duvet she could pull up over her ears when—

“But isn’t it just so lovely out this way?” Jenny chirruped again. “I am so pleased that even if we must spend all day in the carriage, at least it should be in such splendid weather. Don’t you think?”

Alicia winced at this interruption. Though she hardly liked to be rude to her doting maid, she preferred to savour her expectations of the end of their journey in hopes of perhaps hastening their pace.

“In fact, I cannot remember the last time we have had a day this warm and l—”

“I said yes, Jenny,” Alicia snapped. Then, before the matron could attempt to infect her with that abominable enthusiasm yet again, Alicia rested her head against the wall of the carriage, closing her eyes and shutting out the view from her mind.

In a polite conversation among civilized society, Alicia would naturally nod her assent that, yes, the countryside has its unique charms. She would mutter something vaguely approving whenever

some gentleman would wax rhapsodic about how the hills and fields of Old Blighty really were without parallel anywhere in the world, and would bite her tongue whenever, late into the night, a ball would lapse into a jovial drunken rendition of that song about ‘England’s green and pleasant land’.

But if she were pressed even a little bit, Alicia would loose her tongue and reveal what she secretly believed: the countryside was a *terrible* place. It lacked all the conveniences that made life worth living, in her estimation, and even putting aside all the dangers that could befall a lady in the out-of-doors—the wolves, bears, rainstorms, and whatever else the Devil saw fit to plague ‘England’s mountains green’—even the mundane pleasures of the countryside held absolutely no appeal for her. The sun burned her delicate skin, the air was full of stinging wasps and foul animal smells, and the grass stained her fine garments.

Worst of all were the people who lived in the country, who had always seemed to Alicia to be the worst sort of yahoos and bumpkins. Privately, she had a suspicion that every intelligent person believed exactly the same way as she, and all carried on about the pleasures of bucolic life merely as an affectation.

No, she told herself for the dozenth time since leaving Missus Miggins’ home in Portsmouth, the countryside was a place to be endured while travelling to more worthwhile places, nothing more. At least until the great men of English society found a way to do away with it entirely.

And endure it I will, thought Alicia. Her head jostling and bumping against the wall of her family’s old carriage was a poor substitute for her beloved bed, but it would have to do for now.

Crash!

Before Alicia could draw breath, her eyes shot open as the world spun around her in a vortex.

What is happening? she scarcely had time to think.

Her stomach leaped into her throat with a sudden sense of weightlessness, but before she could even open her mouth to cry out in alarm, her innards slammed back down to the earth. She and Jenny were thrown into a tangle of limbs and shouts and screaming horses and sickening crunching sounds.

“Help!” someone cried—Alicia could not be sure if it was Jenny’s voice or her own.

And then, as suddenly as it had begun, it was all over. She waited for the sounds of an angelic chorus—or barring that, a shooting sensation telling her she had broken a bone. None came. From her position on the floor of the darkened carriage Alicia dared to move a finger, then an arm. Somewhere nearby she heard the panicked cries of horses and a man’s voice attempting to calm them gently.

“Oh, Miss Alicia, what’s happened?” moaned Jenny from amid the cloud of dust that hung in the air between them.

“I don’t know. Are you all right, Jenny?”

“I think so,” she coughed.

Hesitantly, Alicia picked herself up onto her hands and knees, a task made considerably more difficult by the fact that the floor appeared to be tilted at a steep angle.

“Miss Alicia!” came a shaky voice from out the window above her. A worried face appeared at the window beneath a dusty top hat.

“I’m fine, Herbert,” she said in a surprisingly calm voice.

After a short effort that rocked the carriage even more in its precarious position, the door swung open and the face of Herbert Place offered a hand down to her. In a trice, the two women were standing in the cloud of dust that surrounded the carriage.

“What happened?” asked Alicia.

“Damn carriage must’ve hit a rock...or a boulder, more like. ‘Scuse my language, Miss. Are you sure you’re not injured?” asked Herbert, his hands nervously switching between reaching out to Alicia and kneading one another in a frenzy.

“We may be sore on the morrow, but I don’t think we’re hurt,” Alicia answered. She smoothed her dress and looked around. The scenery surrounding them was as empty and bucolic as before, though the green wilderness had gradually given way to fields of ripe wheat and apple trees. Really, all of the substance that had changed, as far as she could tell, was that they had stopped here, wherever “here” happened to be.

“I do hope whatever the problem is won’t take long to fix, Herbert,” Alicia said, shading her eyes with a hand and looking down the road. London was nowhere in sight, unfortunately. “Since none of us is hurt there’s no reason to linger here.”

“Beggin’ your pardon, Miss,” said the old coachman, scratching behind his dirty ear. “But I don’t think we’ll be going anywhere anytime soon.”

“What do you mean?” she snapped. “Surely there’s some way to right the...”

But as her eyes wandered to the wreckage of the carriage, Alicia’s protests died on her tongue. She was hardly an expert in such matters, but the splintered wood that jutted out from under the front of the vehicle and the twisted scraps of metal lying at her feet did not indicate a quick repair was likely. Not only was the whole vehicle tilted terribly to the right side, but the front-right wheel was missing entirely.

Visions of her warm, comfortable bed vanished before her eyes. Alicia bit her lip, hoping to stifle the tide of tears that swelled within her.

“Oh, Lord save us!” Jenny cried, tears coming as easily to the middle-aged woman as smiles.

“What are you going to do now, Herbert?” Herbert muttered to himself, pacing back and forth as the colour drained from his face. The team of horses was still hitched to the remains of the carriage and began to stomp and whinny more nervously with their driver’s distress. “How are you going to get Miss Alicia home now? You can’t bloody well carry her on your shoulders, you daft fool!”

Grace is going to be furious, she thought, swallowing. Her sister had made a point of insisting Alicia be present for some dinner party or other later in the week. Alicia had used this social obligation repeatedly during her visit with Missus Miggins, imagining it would be a convenient way to excuse her quick departure back for London. Now, if it was indeed as grim as Herbert seemed to think it was, there was no way she would be able to keep this appointment.

Hearing the distant cry of an eagle overhead, Alicia was jerked back to her present dilemma. *Never mind Grace now!* she thought to herself, biting her lip in consternation. *That's the least of our worries. Whatever are we going to do stuck out in the middle of nowhere like this?*

"Ahoy, there!" called a strange voice from down the road. Alicia glanced toward the voice and sighted a rough-looking man a hundred yards off. At first, she paid him no mind, returning to her own fretting.

What are we going to do? she asked herself, fingers clutching her skirt nervously. *What happens if we are still here on the open road come nightfall? Or if we are overrun by some wild animal or brigands this far from civilization?*

"I say, is everyone all right there?" the voice called again with its odd twang. Alicia felt her hairs stand on end as she realized the man was coming closer to them, and she instinctively grabbed Jenny's hand and walked them both behind the shattered remains of the carriage.

"Miss Alicia, what—?" Jenny asked quietly before Alicia hissed her into silence.

“We don’t know this man,” she said in a quiet voice. “He could be a... a highwayman, for all we know!”

“A highwayman?” the maid gulped. Against their better judgment, both women turned to peer at the oncoming man from behind the carriage, their eyes wide with fear.

“Y...yessir, thank you, sir, no problem here,” Herbert answered, sensing Alicia’s fear at the approaching individual. Even as he stammered this reply, the horses ceased their nickering and stood silently.

The stranger stopped and folded his arms, looking over every figure in the scene with a careful eye. He ran a calloused hand through his short-cropped, hay-coloured hair, then rubbed it against his clean-shaven cleft chin in thought. He was bareheaded and without a jacket, and the sleeves of his rough white shirt were rolled up to his elbows, exposing muscles that looked to have been built with years of hard labour.

He doesn’t look like a highwayman, Alicia thought, taking in the man’s appearance warily—not that she knew much of such things, apart from the drawings she had seen of the dashing Dick Turpin and his ilk in her books.

Indeed, from his shabby attire and the sweat on his brow, she guessed this man was more likely to be a labourer from the nearby fields, despite his almost patrician nose. Still, a simple man could be as dangerous as a robber, she reminded herself, her stomach twisted in knots.

“Well, I don’t mean to argue with you, sir,” the man said in a slow, deliberate voice. His pale blue eyes twinkled with humor, a tiny smile coming to his lips in the middle of his tanned and ruddy face. “But around this part of the country, a carriage missing a wheel is considered rather a big problem.”

The stranger stepped forward, provoking Herbert and both women to start in fear. The man stopped in place, putting both hands up to show he was unarmed. “Forgive me, sir. Ladies,” he said, his smile still patiently plastered across his face. “Laurence Gillingham.”

Alicia felt her jaw drop, the man’s friendly greeting to her taking her completely by surprise. Oddly, rather than fear or offence, her first thought was embarrassment at how silly she must look with her mouth gaping like a codfish. She snapped her mouth shut, fixing a scowl on her face even as her pale cheeks reddened.

Herbert glanced back at Alicia. She shook her head, then nodded it, unclear of what she was conveying even as she tried to puzzle out what she wanted to happen. Her eyes flitted back to the strange man, this Laurence Gillingham, who was now walking in a wide circle, his gaze fixed on the carriage as if in thought.

“Hit a rock, looks like?”

“Think so, Mister...Gillingham, was it?” Herbert replied cautiously, stepping forward to examine what this Laurence was looking at. In the distance, Alicia sighted more people coming down the road, from the same direction Laurence had approached them. She was still frozen to the spot, unsure whether this was a good omen or an ill one.

“Ah, yes. There you have it. See that there? The axle snapped clean in two,” said Laurence, pointing to the broken carriage.

“Oh, yes, yes,” Herbert replied, nodding frantically. “It...ah, it can be repaired, of course...can’t it? Sir?”

“Oh, of course, I’ve no doubt,” said Laurence calmly. Then, in an affectionate voice, he cooed, “I say, here’s a pretty girl, isn’t she?”

Alicia felt her head spin as her relief at his first words turned to outrage at his next. She turned to look at Jenny as if to confirm her ears did not deceive her, but the maid had quietly retreated to sit and fan herself beneath the shade of a nearby tree. *What insolence! I cannot believe how brazen this man would speak of—*

But once again she found herself rendered speechless as she saw that Laurence had directed this compliment to one of the chestnut mares tied to the carriage. He came close to the beast, speaking softly to it and scratching it behind the ear. As he did so, a calm came over the horse, and its anxious whinnies were replaced with a more contented sound. Alicia attempted to hang onto her outrage at this strange man but felt it slip through her fingers, replaced by a strange fascination at his behaviour.

“So, sir, I, ah...” Herbert stammered, coming behind Laurence with his hat in hand. “You say you can repair our carriage?”

“Oh, no, by no means,” the man said calmly.

“What!”

He gave the horse another solid pat on the neck, then slowly turned and spoke directly to Alicia. "I said it *can* be repaired. But not by me. I'm afraid I'm not much for this kind of trade. Nor is anyone else in this area, I'm afraid. You'll have to see a professional."

"And where might we find a professional, Mister Gillingham?" Alicia asked in a voice she hoped sounded braver than it felt.

At these words, Laurence looked into her eyes for the first time, and once again Alicia felt her breath catch in her throat. The man's eyes were so clear and blue, like the surface of a frozen pond, and his gaze was powerful enough that it felt he was stripping her naked...yet somehow the effect was not as unsettling as that. It was disarming, yes, but intimate, even affectionate.

That said, the effect of this examination was beguiling enough that it took Alicia a moment to notice that she had not heard the man's answer to her question.

"I'm sorry, what did you say?" she asked dumbly.

He gave a queer smile at this, his patience still unbroken even as a few other field workers walked up to inspect the carriage wreck. "I said there should be a man who can fix your carriage for you in Wiltshire."

"And...how far is that?"

“Oh, not far, not far,” said Laurence, his fellows nodding amiably around him. “Forty or fifty miles away, I reckon. Shouldn’t take your man more than a few days to get there and back.”

It took every ounce of strength she had not to faint at this pronouncement. *Lord save us indeed!*

Chapter 2

A Surprising Introduction

“A few days!” exclaimed Alicia and Herbert at the same moment.

“And there is no nearer town?” asked Herbert. “Nowhere else we might get our carriage repaired, or another horse or...or *something*?”

The handful of men and women who now surrounded them murmured their confirmation of this prediction.

“But he...I can’t...what would Jenny and I...?” Alicia found herself babbling, her heart tightening in her chest. She pictured herself and Jenny, holding one another close on the dark road as they were surrounded by all manner of terrible danger. All the perils of the countryside began looming over her once more.

Laurence squinted and looked off into the distance in thought, running a hand through his shock of yellow hair. Alicia could only look on, oddly captivated by the sight—whoever this Laurence Gillingham fellow was, she could not shake the thought that she had misjudged him somehow. His physique and his rough-spun clothing suggested he was little more than a common labourer, yet his gentility and his intelligent manner of speaking belied that conclusion.

At last, he sighed with an air of resolution falling upon his shoulders before he fixed her once more with that powerful blue gaze.

"I know it may not be proper, Miss, but I'd like to offer you and the other lady a room in my house. For a few nights, at least, while you wait for your man to get your carriage fixed or get a new one."

Alicia scoffed, feeling on secure footing for the first time in what felt like ages. "Out of the question," she said breathlessly. "Absolutely not. I could not possibly accept."

She gave the man another quick up-and-down, confirming her initial opinion of him as a bore. Then she felt a pang of guilt, seeing his face fall at her words. *The man does seem a simple country sort. He must really have no idea how unacceptable a proposition this is.*

"Sir, I truly appreciate your offer," said Alicia in a gentler tone. "But you are a stranger, and we are two unwed women. No matter your intentions—which I'm sure are innocent," she added, unsure of why she was so sure of this point, "it would be disgraceful for us to be known to have stayed at your house. Surely there must be some other solution."

Laurence looked off into the distant sky once more, then turned to his neighbours in puzzlement. From their indistinct muttering, they seemed to have no such alternatives

"Is there not some nearby inn, perhaps?" asked Jenny from her spot beneath the tree.

"Or another carriage that may be lent to us?" said Alicia.

They were met by the crowd of country people with naught but stony silence.

“Even...even another horse?” Alicia asked, but swallowed the sound of her words in trepidation of their plight. Just as well, she would later reflect, as neither Jenny nor she was able to ride, so far as she knew.

Her vision was clouded by a wellspring of tears, and she felt her legs tremble dangerously beneath her. *What will become of us?* Alicia wondered, struggling to stay upright.

Then a clear, feminine voice came chiming up from amid the throng. “Under the circumstances, Miss, staying at the Gillingham residence is without a doubt the best course. For your bodily safety as well as your reputation.”

Alicia’s ears perked up, detecting a more familiar manner of speaking. Her eyes fell upon a well-dressed woman not much older than her—though still sun-kissed from time spent in the sun, it appeared—who stepped forward and lifted the corners of her skirts in a delicate curtsy.

“Mary-Anne Stanhope,” the woman said, her yellow hair pinned up attractively beneath a broad sun hat.

Alicia smiled with surprise. The name was a familiar one in her circle; she had heard Grace batting about the name of the Stanhope family for as long as she could remember. “Alicia Ramsbury,” she answered, giving a curtsy of her own. “But—surely you are not Missus Stanhope, wife of *Edward* Stanhope? Of Boothby Lane, in Whitehall?”

"I have that pleasure," said Mary-Anne with a smile. Then the smile twisted at the corner of her mouth, her eyebrow arching. "Well, whether or not it is a pleasure is a matter for another time—for now, I can confirm that whatever it is, it is mine."

Blinking, Alicia was unsure what to make of this development. She was most unaccustomed to such rapid changes in her fortune, and the Stanhopes were as old and well-regarded a family as one could ever meet. She may as well have run across a turbaned king of India as Missus Edward Stanhope in this backward English field.

Forgetting her tact amid all the confusion, she stammered, "But you—but the Stanhope house is in London, not far from my own. What are you doing *here*, of all places, amid these common labourers?"

Mary-Anne stepped forward and took Alicia's arm, and before the stunned young woman could protest, the two were walking slowly away from the ruined carriage. "I know this part of the countryside—we call it Dunwood, as that is the nearest village—may not look like much, Miss Ramsbury, but...well, everyone has to come from somewhere. And this is where I came from before marrying my more-or-less dear husband Edward."

Alicia gasped as she stopped in her tracks, suddenly casting her gaze about at the onlookers. She covered her mouth in shame with her free hand. "Oh, Missus Stanhope, I do apologize, I didn't mean to offend you or—or your countrymen. I just—"

Reaching forward a gloved hand to pat Alicia's own, Mary-Anne shushed her good-naturedly. "Not at all. There is a reason I left this place, after all, just as there is a reason I come back from time to time.

And what lucky happenstance that I should happen to be back here for the summer, paying a visit to the most upstanding, reputable pillar of our tiny community.”

Hardly daring to let herself believe the woman’s words, Alicia blinked away tears of relief. It was then that she realized Mary-Anne had led them more or less in a circle, and standing silently before them with folded arms and a curious smile was the same golden-haired man called Laurence who had made such an improper proposal. Mary-Anne rested her hand on the man’s sweat-stained shirt with great familiarity.

“Oh!” Alicia blurted. “Is this...?”

“I know my brother may have the appearance of a lout,” said the woman, giving Laurence an affectionate pinch on the arm, “but he is indeed a most established and respectable member of our community. Despite his best efforts.”

Laurence rubbed his arm with a glum expression, provoking Mary-Anne to giggle. He spoke in a slow, deep voice that made Alicia feel there was a cannonball rolling around inside her stomach, somehow.

“I’m afraid our family home isn’t much, Miss Ramsbury, especially for a London gentlewoman like yourself. But my sister is staying with us as well, and if the lapse in humility may be excused, my family’s reputation with our neighbours is beyond reproach. We’ve a large house, if an old one, and a small staff, so you should be perfectly comfortable. And I suppose we’re as close to a pillar of the community in these parts as anyone is.”

The throng of labourers around them nodded and mumbled their

assent at this proclamation, some swains slapping Laurence on the back in camaraderie. *Though I suppose I cannot assume any of them are the crude field hands I have taken them for*, Alicia thought with a wry grimace. *For all I know they could all be secret landed knights or dauphins in exile.*

Once again she found her eye roving over the solid frame of this Laurence Gillingham. Where before she eyed him with curiosity, now she sought any clue to confirm or refute what she was being told. *Is he really some sort of important individual out here in the wilderness? A man of means, a man to be trusted? Because he looks like...*

In truth, Laurence looked nothing like anyone she had ever seen before. His loose-low-cut shirt hugged all manner of muscles Alicia was unfamiliar with, and his legs were strong and sleek like a horse's.

He did not seem to be that much older than she, but he so little resembled her male peers in London society—who varied somewhat in their personal qualities but tended to be thin, pale, and rheumatic—that he may as well be a different species entirely. For a moment something about him looked familiar to Alicia, but then she realized with a blush that his form resembled not a person she knew but a particular Grecian statue of a nude athlete.

“But of course, no one can make this decision for you. By all means, seek a different answer to your predicament if you would prefer,” said Mary-Anne, snapping Alicia out of her reverie. “My brother’s invitation is an honest one, and the best and safest solution I can imagine, but it is yours to refuse.”

“Mine?” Alicia yelped. She blinked, suddenly putting together the gravity of everything she had been told. “I don’t...I’m not...”

No one rushed to finish her sentence or make her decision for her. Instead, all eyes busied themselves looking over the wreck of the carriage, save the handful of men who began walking back to their work in the fields. Laurence's striking blue eyes stayed fixed on Alicia, prompting her to look away, flustered.

They are all waiting for me to decide if we shall stay or not, she said to herself dumbly. What on earth is the right thing to do in this situation?

Alicia felt she had been caught in a whirlwind. For all her complaints to the contrary—to her teachers, to her sister Grace, to her parents before they had passed on—she was entirely unused to having to make such important decisions about her own fate. While she had never made a secret of her whims and simple desires, determining where and how she would take care of herself in this frightening situation was a terrifying prospect.

She looked askance at Jenny, then at Herbert, who seemed to be even more baffled than she was herself. "What should I do?" Alicia asked in a quiet voice, her eyes widening with unease.

Stepping close and keeping her voice deferentially quiet, Jenny said softly, "It's for you to decide, Miss Alicia. Do what you feel is right."

But what if I don't have any clue what is right?

Drawing in a deep, shaky breath, Alicia looked around herself, desperately seeking some perspective or wisdom she had overlooked. Though the land here was more cultivated than she had realized, with farmland stretching off to the horizon, a gust of wind and the cry of a buzzard overhead confirmed that she was still in the wilderness. A

cloud passing across the sun momentarily shrouded their bend in the road in shadows, the orange sun marching ever closer to the horizon. Alicia shivered as she imagined what Dunwood would be like in the open once night fell. Staying in place was no choice at all.

The longer she struggled with this decision, the more faint she felt herself grow, whether from the difficulty of her quandary or from the heat of the summer sun. Seeing Jenny and Herbert look to her with growing nervousness, she knew a decision must be made.

Her mind returned the same objections to Mister Gillingham's proposal, over and over: it might be unsafe, it would be a social disaster, Grace would so furiously disapprove. The latter two Alicia pushed from her mind; she had been long enough among the ton to know there was no living one's life in a way that avoided being talked about, and her dear sister would always find something to grouse about.

And somehow, her safety with Mister Gillingham seemed beyond question. *Having a proper English society woman staying in the same house would naturally be a guarantee of our security*, she mused. She carefully regarded the man himself as he helped Herbert unhitch the pair of horses from their broken harness. His biceps bulged with effort as she watched him lift the heavy wooden shaft from the ground.

Yes, Alicia thought, swallowing. *I am sure I do not have anything to fear from Mister Gillingham.*

"All right."

Every eye looked back to her once again with expectation. Alicia realized that she had in fact made her decision, and had said it aloud.

Clearing her throat, she steeled herself and looked up into Laurence's eyes. "Thank you, Mister Gillingham. Jenny and I are very grateful for your offer of lodging, and we will accept your hospitality until Mister Place can return with a repaired carriage as soon as—"

She stopped, suppressing a gasp as Laurence's mouth broke open into the widest, toothiest smile she had ever seen. The man's face was already glowing with health, and now with this expression of boyish enthusiasm, he seemed to shine like the sun.

Then another change came over the man. With a natural poise and grace, he directed the other nearby men, "Well, what are all of you waiting around for? Nothing more to see here, you'd best be off before you waste the whole day's sunlight."

As the crowd dispersed, grumbling as they returned to their labours, Laurence moved to help Herbert prepare for his departure and move Alicia's little baggage to the back of the other horse.

"You won't regret this, Miss Ramsbury," said Mary-Anne, taking Alicia's arm once more. "I have no doubt you will look on this meeting as one of the happiest accidents that could befall you."

"I...am certain you are right," Alicia answered with as much confidence as she could muster.

"I'll be back as soon as I can, Miss," said Herbert, swinging himself up onto the back of one of the chestnut mares. There was a small sack with a few simple supplies attached to the back of the saddle.

“Shouldn’t be more than a day or two.”

“That’s good,” Alicia said, reaching a hand out as though to bestow protection upon her family’s stalwart driver.

The man’s grey eyes looked down to her with concern, his jaw set in resolve. “I swear, Miss. I’ll get you home safe, no matter what.”

“I know, Herbert. Thank you.”

He shot a look at Laurence that surprised Alicia with its fierceness. Then, with a curt nod, he lashed the reins and was cantering off down the road. It was only a moment before the cloud of dust he had kicked up dissipated, leaving Alicia truly alone in this strange, unfamiliar place.

Hurry back, Herbert, she thought, trying to suppress a feeling of dread from rising up in her throat. I cannot be rid of this place and back to my bed soon enough.

Chapter 3

Arrival Among Friends

It was a long walk from out on the highway to the Gillinghams' house—nearly a league, over rough terrain—but to Laurence, it was always a welcome one. Especially on a day such as this, with the glorious English countryside in the full bloom of summer. He breathed deeply, the smells of the outdoors mingling in his lungs and filling him with renewed vigour.

An afternoon spent away from chores was something he could hardly afford under normal circumstances, but Laurence could not keep from humming a happy tune under his breath as they pushed forward towards home. He noted the late blossoming of the kingcups by the side of the road and breathed deeply of the wild honeysuckle as they passed it by. If this was truly God's country, as he heard other men describe it, then there truly was no reason to go away from the beauty that surrounded them every day of the year.

One hand guiding Miss Ramsbury's horse by its reins, the other in his pocket, he walked just behind Mary-Anne, Alicia, and Jenny the maid. Judging by the tone of their conversation, his sister was already making fast friends with their visitor.

"Father didn't have much, but he left us everything after he died. Well, to Laurence, anyway. We poor women have to work for a living."

"It sounds like some things are the same everywhere you go!" Alicia replied, laughing. "But however did you find yourself marrying Mister

Stanhope?”

“Oh, it’s a long story and not a terribly interesting one.”

“My sister is insightful as always,” Laurence murmured. Jenny gave him a silent look of mirth, but the other women ignored this comment and continued their conversation about the ins and outs of London society.

With a sore forearm, Laurence wiped the sweat from his forehead. He shook his head in disbelief. *Who would have ever thought this hot summer morning would bring such a strange turn of events?*

For the most part, their conversation flitted among names that meant little and less to Laurence, and he struggled to keep up with just what they were talking about. Every now and then he did have a mind to interject some observation or witticism, but as he opened his mouth he found the words died on his tongue. For some reason, he felt filled with fear that he would say the wrong thing and cause offence with his unsophisticated ways.

Mary-Anne gave him a look over her shoulder, her eyebrows unmistakably communicating the question, “*Since when are you so tongue-tied?*” He shook his head at her, scowling, and mercifully, she seemed to abandon this sport and turned back to her conversation. Laurence breathed a sigh of relief.

Laurence liked to think of himself as an easy-going fellow who was not given to any problems with social interactions. In most cases, he just attempted to be courteous, keep his cool, and let the other party do the talking. Judging by his high standing in the community, he fancied others found him easy to talk to as well. Certainly, he had

never had any trouble conversing with the women of the surrounding farms and villages—they had always been more than happy to carry the burden of conversation, and Laurence had been able to safely assume those young ladies had similar backgrounds and interests as his own.

But this Miss Ramsbury is no Matilda the shepherd's daughter! Laurence thought, giving her a wary eye. Even travelling light and having been thoroughly dishevelled in the carriage wreck, this Alicia was dressed in a fine blue gown that would earn envious stares at any Dunwood wedding or Christmas festivities.

What would I even say to a proper lady like her? Laurence thought, feeling himself growing ever more intimidated by his houseguest's bearing. *From what Mary-Anne has said, these city women are forever falling out over all sort of slights and breaches of etiquette. How is a simple man of the land supposed to keep up?*

They walked on, and the shimmering summer afternoon light fell across Alicia through the oak leaves overhead. From the patchwork shadows that fell over her form, Laurence's eye was caught and completely hooked by the generous curve of Miss Ramsbury's derrière. On the rocky road to the Gillingham estate, her steps were hard and unsure, making her bottom shift back and forth in a most distracting manner. In fact, Laurence was so spellbound by the sight of her voluptuous form that he missed a step and stumbled stupidly behind them.

"Everything all right, Laurence?" asked Mary-Anne.

"Yes," he returned as he hurriedly scrambled back to his proper gait, feeling his face heat up with embarrassment—a colouration that Mary-Anne did not fail to observe, judging by her sardonic smile.

Keep your mind on your feet, Laurence, he thought. And your mouth closed!

“And what about you, Mister Gillingham?”

Laurence looked up, startled from his thoughts. “I’m sorry?”

Her cheeks flushed with their long walk on this hot day, Alicia said, “Well, your sister seems to think your family estate is a lovely place, but nothing compared to any of the greater London homes.”

“Or even the minor ones,” Mary-Anne added with a droll expression.

“And what do you think, then?”

Laurence chewed over his answer to this question for a moment. “I think there’s no better place in the entire world,” he said at last.

This proclamation, however heartfelt, had the effect of throwing their party back into a long silence. For a moment Laurence thought they might not have heard his answer before he finally heard Mary-Anne stifling laughter.

“Oh,” said Alicia. Then, after another long pause, “And have you been many other places, then, Mister Gillingham?”

“Many!” Mary-Anne chuckled. “In his eight-and-twenty years, Laurence has never once been more than fifty miles from the family estate.”

Laurence felt his cheeks redden again with shame. He continued to walk in sullen silence, though Mary-Anne was not yet done with him.

“Not even been to visit his dear sister in London!”

“Oh,” Alicia muttered.

The walk was silent after that. Laurence could not imagine how it was that what he said could cast such a pall over the afternoon, but it was undeniable that he had done so. The beauty of their surroundings now lost on him, his emotions waxed and waned between anger at his sister for making him the target of ridicule and frustration with Alicia for asking in the first place. Eventually, his spirits settled on a solid course of anger at himself for saying such foolishness as though it were some great truth.

Damn fool, he chastised himself. She must think you such a boor, so full of yourself with pride that you look down on everywhere and everyone else! And all for a humble country house that will likely be as impressive to her as a garden shed.

As they walked along and the gulf of silence grew wider and ever more impassable, so too did Laurence feel himself growing increasingly anxious. *I’m not cut out for this*, he said to himself, now fully in a dark mood. *Callous as she may be at times, thank God for Mary-Anne—she knows how to deal with people like Alicia.*

“Here we are, Gillingham Manor—so to speak,” chirped Mary-Anne.

“Oh!” cried Alicia, stopping in place to take a look as Laurence did the same.

It didn't seem to matter how near he stayed to home, nor many hundreds of times it happened; every time Laurence rounded the last bend of the dirt road and his family home came into view, he could not help but break into a smile. Whether the aged eaves were capped with snow or the ancient elm trees were an explosion of red and orange, whether the Gillingham dogs were chasing a new litter of puppies through the spring flowers, or napping lazily in the summer heat, as they were today—any time of year, the sight always made him feel as happy and content as anything ever could.

Out of the corner of his eye, he noted a strange look come across Alicia's face as she stopped and regarded the view before them. She glanced at the muddy-brown gables, the peaked roof over the second story of the structure, the tall, narrow windows that ran along the main hall. Each fixture of the house was a source of countless treasured memories for Laurence—yet now, instead of relishing these recollections, he found himself waiting anxiously to see this London gentlewoman's response.

“Oh! Why it's lovely!” she exclaimed. Her words were kind, but Laurence still felt ill at ease and caught himself holding his breath as they walked down the path toward the house.

By the time they reached the front door he felt ready to run off into the woods and abandon the whole enterprise. Instead, taking a small gasp of air, he did the most polite alternative he could think of.

“Mary-Anne,” said Laurence with a small clearing of his throat, “why don’t you go on and take our guests to the house? You can show them around while Margaret prepares supper.”

“And just what is the lord of the manor so busy with that he can’t see to his guests himself?” quipped Mary-Anne with a hand rested archly on her hip.

Smiling, Laurence patted the horse on the side. “I thought it best to take care of Victoria after the scare she’s had.”

Alicia looked at him, uncomprehending. “Victoria? Is that...one of your staff?”

Clearing his throat, Laurence answered, “Your horse? I thought that was what your Mister Place called her, though I may have misheard.”

“Oh, I...yes, I suppose so?” Alicia said with an embarrassed-sounding laugh.

Mary-Anne swooped between them then, once again clamping onto Alicia’s arm and beginning to walk her toward the house, Jenny trailing behind the two and tittering. “Come along, now, I’ll show you to the room where you’ll be staying. You won’t want to be around when my brother starts talking to the horses anyway, I’m sure...”

The girl doesn’t know the name of her own family’s horses? Laurence

thought, shaking his head. He patted the handsome mare's neck as they walked to the barn together. *Either she's even richer than she lets on—rich enough to have too many horses to keep track of—or else she leaves such matters to others to worry about.*

As soon as he thought this he chastised himself for the ridiculousness of the idea. *Damn fool, of course, an English gentlewoman doesn't take care of her own horses.* Still, it seemed a sad state of affairs for poor Victoria. The beast had had the scare of her life out on the road, surely, and to get so little consideration from her owner struck Laurence as downright tragic.

As Dennis and all the Gillingham hired hands looked to be still out in the fields, Laurence saw he was the only person in the large, creaky barn when he swung open the doors. But he was far from alone there, as was immediately apparent from the cacophony that filled the stuffy air when the sunlight flooded in.

"Afternoon, ladies!" Laurence called back in return. "Agatha, Bernadette, good to see you're in higher spirits than this morning," he greeted the two large milk cows in their stall as he led Victoria to the horse stalls.

He carried on these friendly salutations to each animal they passed, calling each by name and inquiring after their health, until he finally brought the exhausted horse to an empty stall.

"Rhea, Robinson," Laurence said to his mare and foal respectively, gesturing to the horse he had brought in with him. "This is Victoria. I'm sure you'll make her feel right at home." The horses' friendly whinnies told him Victoria would have nothing to worry about.

It was an easy thing to get Victoria settled into her lodgings. After the day she had had, the mare took very well to her bucket of oats and warm, dry stall.

“You’re a good girl, Victoria. Miss Alicia is luckier than she knows to have as fine a lady as you pulling her carriage,” he said in a fond voice.

Then Laurence gave a heavy sigh, realizing his presence would be expected in the house soon. He needed to let Margaret know about the extra people staying for supper, and see if Dennis had gone home to take care of his mother yet, or if he was still available to fetch some water and other comforts for Alicia and Jenny. As always, there was so much to be done in the Gillingham household—and today was even more demanding than usual, with this interruption to their routine.

Attractive though she was, the thought of playing host to this glamorous woman from London felt impossibly wearing to him.

“There is something I dislike about your mistress, girl, excuse me for saying so,” Laurence said in a soft voice, brushing a bit of road dirt from Victoria’s side. “Stuffy. Cold, maybe. No head for the real world outside her ballroom, I suspect.”

But he could not deny that, however true he felt this judgment to be, something inside him was enchanted by Alicia. Certainly, there was her physical beauty, obvious even in the somewhat disarrayed state she was in today. Her smile was brilliant, all the more because of its rarity, and the shape of her body clearly drove Laurence to distraction.

More than that, though, she was just so unlike any woman he had

ever known—a bit cold, certainly, and full of all the pomp and artifice of city life that Laurence had always mistrusted. Yet all that seemed so much less important than something he saw peeking out from within her.

Somewhere inside Alicia, hidden perhaps even to herself, there was a confident, capable young woman...he wondered if he would be lucky enough to see her emerge in the next few days.

* * *

Alicia opened her mouth wide and loosed a titanic yawn. Though the sun had still not set and it was likely no later than seven o'clock, she was too fatigued by the day's misadventures to stay away from bed any longer.

Besides, she thought, turning down the covers on the small, humble bed. It may not be the bed I had my heart set on this morning, but it is still a flat surface with a pillow. That will do, for now.

Indeed, as soon as she slipped into the sheets she was surprised at just how comfortable it was. The duvet was much older than her own at home, but it was stuffed with goose down, and the warm pressure atop her body eased any kinks or strains not erased by the warm bath Mary-Anne had so kindly had drawn for her.

As Alicia's eyes fluttered, taking in unfamiliar surroundings of the room, bathed in the orange light of twilight, she marvelled at how quickly her life had taken a turn for the unexpected. Instead of her own bed, she was now in this strange, dusty room in an old house in the middle of nowhere. Instead of a sumptuous supper with Grace, prepared by their family's staff, she quickly ate a bit of cold beef and

was glad for it.

Most of all, instead of returning from Missus Miggins' home to her own familiar continuity, she was here, with nothing to do with herself but wait. No public visits, no fights with her sister, no delicate social manoeuvring.

And that Laurence... she thought, her heart quickening ever so slightly. *What on earth is such a man doing out here in the country?* If a man with Laurence's muscular build and staid, polite manner were ever sighted in London society, Alicia was sure, he would rise to the upper circles of the ton within a week. If he weren't immediately drowned in marriage proposals from every eligible young woman in the city, that is.

And I have such a man as my host... She yawned despite the tremble that ran through her insides at the memory of Laurence's warm smile and bulging biceps. A smile came across her face, picturing Laurence walking so confidently to her aid after the crash. She wondered how dirty and sweaty he must be after such labour, and pondered if he would be using the same bathtub she had used. An image flashed before her of the man stripping off his sheer white shirt, his tight brown trousers...

Alicia started at such a wicked thought. She was no stranger to matters of romance, but it was unlike her to be so preoccupied with the male form, especially of a man so outside her social circles. *Perhaps it is best Herbert will only be gone for a day or two*, she thought. *Though it is a bit of a pity, somehow. Whatever else he is, Laurence does seem to be a remarkable man.*

Then her eyes slipped closed, and she fell into blissful sleep.

Chapter 4

Morning Breaks

The woods closed in around her. Huge trees, tall and dark enough to blot out the whole of the sky, stretched out in every direction in the shadowy forest.

Alicia gasped for breath as she looked around her for any means of escape. Everywhere she turned looked exactly the same as everywhere else. Worst of all was the awful silence of the wood—she could hear nothing but her own ragged breathing and her heartbeat, which hammered faster and harder as she spun about to find the way out.

Then it grew worse as the sound of her exhalations was joined by another sound. A strange, low, animalistic sound that came from everywhere at once.

“Hello?” Alicia said quietly, her voice condensing into white vapour before her eyes. “Who’s out there?” she asked, a bit louder this time. There was no answer to her query.

Then she saw the pair of shining eyes, peering at her from amid the trees, and an inhuman scream rang out through the pines.

“Aah!”

Alicia sat bolt upright, scattering sweat from her brow. She fought for breath, looking around at the alien space in which she found herself.

Where am I? she thought, her heart in her throat. *What's going on?*

Before she could summon an answer to these questions, her blood froze as she heard the sound from her dream once again fill the room.

It was a long, long moment before Alicia recognized the sound as the voice of a rooster conducting his morning reveille just out her window.

Just a rooster, she said to herself, putting a hand to her chest and swinging her legs over the side of the little bed. *Calm yourself, foolish girl. That was just a dream. You're in Mister Gillingham's house, and you're perfectly safe.*

Though the room lacked a clock, between the colour of the light and that particular birdsong that awoke her, Alicia guessed it was perhaps eight o'clock in the morning. She had slept through the night. It had apparently been a hard, dreamless sleep save for this morning's frightening visitation.

Once she caught her breath and shook the sleep from her mind, Alicia dressed herself in a fresh change of clothes. Jenny had so helpfully assisted her in bringing her few possessions up to the room the night before, though Alicia was growing a bit tired of having to wear the same few outfits every day since leaving for Portsmouth a few weeks before.

I wonder if Herbert is back yet? she asked herself. This question was swiftly put aside by the loud grumble from her stomach. *It seems other matters are of more pressing concern. For now, anyway.* Alicia hoped there might be something to eat downstairs as she opened her door onto the sunny sitting room.

“Ah, good morning, Miss!” came Jenny’s chipper voice from her seat by the window. Her hands, as usual, were occupied with her knitting, and she did not rise as she greeted her employer.

“Good morning, Jenny,” Alicia returned with a smile. “You passed a good night out here, I hope?”

“Oh, yes, thank you! This country air is most excellent for the lungs, you know. Slept like a newborn babe right here in my chair.”

After another handful of pleasantries, the two women thought they would descend the stairs in search of something to eat. As they walked Alicia found her eyes lingering on some of the ornaments and paintings that adorned the walls, all of which she had missed the night before in her fatigue. Though it struck her as rather snobbish, she was surprised to see such decoration in the simple country house.

I wonder if these were put here by Laurence, or if he had some art-loving forbearer? thought Alicia.

The windows were thrown open to let in the gentle morning breeze, and the small dining hall was bathed in the blue-white light of morning. Atop the creaky old wooden table was a simple spread of eggs, bread, cheese, and preserved fruit. Sitting in a chair at one end of it was Mary-Anne, her eyes twinkling with humour as always.

“So you both survived your night in the wilderness, then, I take it?” she asked, rising to greet her visitors. “Please, join me, and thank goodness you arrived when you did. I was beginning to worry that I should have to eat this entire repast on my own—and knowing how I hate to shy away from a challenge, I would do it.”

“Thank you, Missus Stanhope, that would be lovely,” said Alicia graciously.

“Margaret only prepares supper for us, so I’m afraid you’ll have to do with yesterday’s bread and my rather poor culinary skills,” Mary-Anne said. “Though even I can’t foul up boiled eggs, lucky for all of us.”

“I’m sure it all looks just wonderful,” replied Alicia. Suddenly ravenous, she tucked into the dishes before her with gusto. Though it was a bit simpler than her usual fare—whenever possible Alicia preferred to begin the day with buttery French pastries—as ever, hunger was the best seasoning, and the relatively plain foods were as delicious as anything she had ever tasted. Jenny, as was her wont, confined herself to the boiled eggs.

“I was hoping we would have a chance to speak a bit more today, Miss Ramsbury,” said Mary-Anne congenially after a few moments of quietly watching her visitors stuff themselves.

“Indeed? What about?” asked Alicia, helping herself to a boiled egg that proved to be not only perfectly cooked, but with a much yellower yolk than she was accustomed to.

“Everything!” Mary-Anne laughed. “As you may be able to guess,

there is not a great deal that goes on around here. And as fond as I am of my dear brother, and as necessary as it is to take a bit of time apart from my beloved husband—have I mentioned that particular necessity yet?”

Alicia laughed. “You have.”

“Well I’m sorry to say the novelty here in Dunwood expires remarkably quickly. I am always gratified to have the chance to visit Laurence, but by the second or third day, I tend to become dangerously bored. Every day is much like another out here.”

Chewing a bit more thoroughly than required to allow for an easy change of subject, Alicia asked, “Do you visit your brother often, then? Since he does not come to visit you, as you said?”

“Not as often as all that—perhaps once a year. Nearly every summer, I should say, since I first went away to London. Edward came himself, once, against my better judgment.” She cast a sardonic look to Jenny, who had moved onto demolishing her fourth piece of thick country bread. “You should have seen him. We arrived on Monday, and by our Wednesday here he was sunburnt, his ankles were too swollen to walk, and he could not stop sneezing.”

“So much for the health benefits of the countryside!” Alicia said with a laugh.

“It was all perfectly bearable—for me, at least. Until he stumbled into that beehive on Wednesday evening. He hasn’t been back here since, and that suits all three of us just fine!”

Alicia had another piece of bread buttered and halfway raised to her lips when the companionable quiet of the room was split by a loud banging sound, followed by a series of thumps. She turned toward the source of the sound and saw Laurence trudging into the room with heavy, muddy boots.

“Good morning, Miss Ramsbury, Miss Jenny,” he said genteelly. A warm smile was on his lips, one that strangely prompted Alicia to look away in embarrassment lest she be caught staring. “I trust you both had a good night’s sleep?”

“Yes, I...” Alicia began to answer before she detected a strong, musky odour permeating the room. She sniffed, her nose wrinkling, then looked a bit closer at Laurence as he stomped over to the table and took an empty seat.

What is that all over him? she thought, trying to hide her distaste at the interruption. His shirt was dripping with sweat, his hands and clothing covered in blobs of something brown that she hoped were mud.

“I’m glad to hear it,” Laurence said. He reached out a dirt-covered hand for the loaf of bread in front of Alicia, and she felt herself recoil against her better manners.

Mary-Anne cleared her throat loudly, freezing Laurence’s hand in place. “Please, Miss Ramsbury, forgive my brother’s untidy state. He has been out doing chores on the estate all morning, and apparently forgot to clean his hands before joining us for breakfast. And every other part of him, I can see.”

Chastened, Laurence stood from the table without a word and stalked

off to another part of the house.

"I'm so sorry, Miss Ramsbury," said Mary-Anne, pleasantness returning to her voice. "My brother really can be a complete oaf at times."

"No, it's...not at all, really," Alicia protested, forcing a smile. "This is his home, after all. He can...conduct himself as he likes, I'm sure." She hoped the words sounded more convincing aloud than they were in her head.

"You're kind to say so. Though if I'm being honest, kindness and snappishness have the same extremely limited effect upon civilizing my brother's behaviour."

Alicia struggled not to sniff when Laurence returned to the table, hands clean even if the rest of him was still caked with dirt. "So, Miss Ramsbury, I've been so curious since we first came across you on the road yesterday," said Mary-Anne as she took a sip of tea. "Where exactly where you coming from on our little highway?"

"And where were you going?" Laurence added through a mouthful of cheese. Mary-Anne shot him an aggravated look at his manners.

"I was going back to London, having been in Portsmouth for a time," said Alicia, her hands resting in her lap. "Visiting an old family friend. Missus Miggins was very good to my sister and me, especially after our mother and father died."

"Oh, my dear, I'm sorry to hear it," said Mary-Anne, extending a hand

to Alicia in sympathy. “We know ourselves how horribly sad it can be to lose your parents.”

“Thank you, you’re very kind,” murmured Alicia. She had grown so tired of saying those same words whenever she was made to explain her orphaned state, and they somehow sounded even more pathetic than usual today.

“Your sister lives in London as well? And she is still waiting for your arrival, then?” asked Laurence in a concerned tone.

“Yes, I...suppose she is.”

Laurence and Mary-Anne shared a significant look. The sister nodded, then said in a less jocular voice than usual, “If you like, we can have a letter sent into the city.”

Alicia nodded gamely. “Thank you, that would be very kind of you.” Then, to put off any follow-up questions or offers, she picked up a massive slice of the strong white cheese and took a bite, though she was already stuffed to the gills.

In truth, she had thought of asking after the very same thing the previous night. But the prospect of writing to Grace, of wording her situation in a way that would not draw too much of her sister’s legendary ire or send her into a dead faint, had been entirely too much to bear.

Tomorrow, Alicia said to herself. If Herbert isn’t back by tomorrow, I’ll write Grace a letter then. Surely I can be forgiven one more day without

having to be consumed with avoiding my sister's scorn, and there's no reason to burden the Gillinghams with our own sisterly quarrels.

Seeing that her hosts were carefully examining her silence, Alicia swallowed her cheese and asked the first thing that came into her mind:

“Do you not have a wife, then, Mister Gillingham? Or some other special woman in your life?”

It was only when she saw three pairs of eyes looking at her when Alicia realized how this question might be interpreted. She fought not to flush with embarrassment as Laurence wiped crumbs away from his mouth with his sleeve.

“I think it would be best to say that there's no one who has caught my eye yet,” he said with a winning smile. “Or my heart.”

“My brother means he has yet to find a woman who meets his bizarrely high standards,” interjected Mary-Anne, a conversational quirk to which Alicia had already become accustomed.

I know the feeling, Alicia thought as the siblings lapsed once more into their friendly—she assumed—squabbling. Whatever your foibles, Mister Gillingham, I pray your fortunes change for the better. No matter what Grace may say, no one deserves to be left alone.

Chapter 5

Love Abounding

Mid-afternoons at the Gillingham House appeared to be much the same as mornings. Even with the windows open the old, dark house was a rather warm, close place, and these conditions had compelled Jenny to her chair for a nap. Mary-Anne had gone to her room some time ago, complaining of a headache, and she assumed Laurence was off on some further filthy bit of farm work.

As a consequence, Alicia found herself in a situation that she had longed for quite often yet was wholly unused to: she was alone.

She had decided straight after breakfast that it would be entirely inappropriate to wander about the rooms of the Gillingham house like a common busybody. After all, these people had been kind enough to open their home to her, and it would be most impolite to poke her nose where she was not invited.

Alicia had strictly lived up to this resolution for nearly an hour before she found herself opening doors in search of some way to pass the time. Though from her hosts' encouraging words she knew she did not have to confine herself to the indoors, the sounds of farm animals and bumblebees pouring in from the windows kept her from trying to go outside. Her dislike of the out-of-doors had been thoroughly reinforced by Laurence's dirty appearance and Mary-Anne's story of her husband's plight. Indoors it was.

Though the house was indeed smaller than most of the noble estates she had had the privilege of visiting around London and certainly

smaller than the country houses of the wealthy, it was not so small as Alicia had initially thought.

An hour of wandering the halls revealed a kitchen, the dining room, a handful of small salons or parlours, and a variety of bedrooms in various states of disuse. The furnishings and objects in each room possessed some strange contrast as well: some were well-used to the point of disrepair, while others were so dusty they appeared not to have been touched in a generation or more.

By two o'clock Alicia found herself in a small study or library on the upper floor. In an acquaintance's house in London, she might have thought it belonged to a child judging by the cramped space and small selection of books.

Though she was happy to see, many of the books were familiar to her, with the odd well-loved Dafoe and Richardson nestled between compendiums of agricultural wisdom. *Perhaps those are Mary-Anne's books*, she thought, recalling the vague, distracted responses she had gotten from every gentleman with whom she'd discussed her literary loves.

Seeing one volume sticking partway off the shelf, as though it had been hastily returned to its home, Alicia picked it up curiously. Seeing a scrap of paper stuck partway through, she opened and began to read:

"Sweet are the uses of adversity / Which, like the toad, ugly and venomous, / Wears yet a precious jewel in his head; / And this our life, exempt from public haunt, / Finds tongues in trees, books in the running brooks, / Sermons in stones, and good in everything."

Wide-eyed, she examined the stained and threadbare cover of the tome. *A book of Shakespeare's plays?* she thought in surprise. Carelessly tucking the book under her arm, she continued exploring the little library, shaking her head in confusion.

On the desk was a leather-bound ledger containing columns of numbers. *Accounts from the farm, I suppose?* It was all Greek to her, though it was evident from the complicated list of items and numbers that running even a simple country farm must be a formidable intellectual task. *I wonder if I have misjudged Mister Gillingham even more than I realized?* she thought, frowning. *He may well be more than just a pretty face and friendly manner.*

Tired from her hour of exploration, Alicia allowed herself to sit on a shabby old armchair and let her thoughts wander as she watched the dust pass through the brilliant curtain of sunlight that slashed across the room.

Had her progress to London been uninterrupted, she considered, by this time in the day she would have already had a great deal of social correspondence to catch up on. After completing that, she would likely be out repaying visits from acquaintances or attending some function or another, perhaps stopping for a meal in one of the city's glamorous salons. If she did not have the date wrong, she was expected to attend a premiere at the Opera this evening with Mister Elliot Woodruff, a gentleman friend of hers.

Here in Dunwood, though, her schedule was completely clear. There was nowhere she must go, no one she was expected to see.

Alicia let her thoughts linger a bit longer on this sense of freedom, her imagination conjuring some truly positive aspects of her current situation. While each had its charms, she found herself irked by opera, Mister Woodruff was a terrific bore whose invitation she had accepted

only out of a sense of obligation, and she would likely face a thorough dressing-down from Grace for going in the first place. Now, she realized with a smile, rather than count down the movements on the program and wishing for the hours to pass more quickly, she could spend her time however she liked.

Why, if I wanted to, I could...

She stopped. What was it she wanted to do, exactly? This was another question that she had been confronted with only occasionally over the course of her lifetime—every moment was usually claimed by some obligation or another.

Even if she decided she wanted to do any of the things that had become banal to her in her daily life, such things were just not available to her here in the hinterlands. There would be no social engagements here, no performances to go to nor people to see.

Alicia swallowed, her time stretching out before her like a yawning chasm. Freedom suddenly felt a very intimidating thing.

I can very well understand how Missus Stanhope grows bored so quickly here, thought Alicia with a pang of sympathy. *Herbert, for the sake of my sanity, may your horse be fleet of foot and the road clear of any other dangers.*

She lifted an inch out of her chair as she heard a floorboard squeak at the other end of the room. Unable to prevent a squeak of fright from escaping her mouth, Alicia saw at once that it was Mister Gillingham, seemingly freshly bathed and more properly attired, standing in the doorway with a curious expression on his ruddy face.

"I'm sorry," she found herself saying. "I just...I saw this room, and I... forgive me for intruding." *Why am I apologizing?* she thought, blushing.

"There's no need for apologies," the man said with the friendly smile she had come to expect from him. "My sister and I said you were welcome to anything you like in the house, and we meant it."

"Of course. Err, thank you."

Alicia felt her muscles tense as she realized she should not be alone in a room with a strange man, especially an unmarried one. But after another heartbeat, she realized the simultaneous impracticality and needlessness of enlisting Jenny as a chaperone. *The man is friendly enough and has given me no reason to fear. Let it go this time, Alicia.*

A chilly fog of silence rolled through the room. Alicia found herself glancing up at the rafters and over at the window, strangely afraid to look at her handsome host. When she did risk a glance in his direction, she saw his arms were crossed and his eyes were doing the same awkward dance around their surroundings.

"I see you found my Shakespeare," said Laurence. Her eyes met his and for a long moment, she found herself lost in their unspeakable blueness. In the shining light of the afternoon, even from a few yards away she could see that nestled within their icy colour was a halo of bright gold, complementing his hair beautifully.

"Oh, yes?" was all Alicia managed to answer. She blinked and saw that he was wordlessly pointing in her direction, and she flushed as

she realized the book was still under her arm.

“Oh, yes!” she repeated, holding it out at an odd angle. “This is yours, then? I saw there was a page marked here. What was it, now...?” She reopened the marked page and began to recite, “*Finds tongues in trees*
—”

“*Books in the running brooks, / Sermons in stones, and good in everything,*” Laurence finished, his eyes gazing off into the distance. “*As You Like It*. I’ve always liked that one best.”

“I’m afraid I haven’t had the pleasure of seeing it,” Alicia said carefully, unsure of just how to proceed in this dialogue. “Ladies are always reciting monologues from one play or another at parties and shows, though. And sometimes my sister and I go to one of the productions at the theatres in London. Last year’s *Tempest* was quite a wonderful spectacle.”

Laurence’s smile broadened, portending something unclear to Alicia. “I’m sure it was. I’ve...never seen one of those plays put on, I’m afraid. Honestly, I’m not sure I’d care to.”

“Oh.” She immediately began to regret her haste to connect with him on this topic, looking away once again.

“I’m sure it’s wonderful,” he added. “For me, though, there’s just so many beautiful words and ideas in those plays, I can’t imagine I would be able to appreciate a tenth of it if I were distracted by actors and scenery and whatnot.”

“I’m...sure you’re quite right.”

As terribly and irrevocably as a change in the weather, the silence crept over them once again. Hoping to cover her shyness and her shame at being a poor conversationalist, Alicia gave a small cough, her gaze fixed on an indeterminate point in space.

“Forgive me,” Laurence said in a low voice, his posture straightening. “I should not have bothered you.” He turned to leave and stepped back toward the door.

“No!” she called after him, stopping the man in his tracks. Surprised by the fervour that had found its way into her voice, she gave a nervous laugh and continued in a quieter tone, “It...it is your house, after all. You can do whatever you like. And it should...I would not be bothered if you stayed.”

With the same care that seemed to underlie the man’s every action, he slowly turned back into the room and gave her that damnable smile that was every bit as inscrutable as it was heartwarming.

“Very well, if you like,” said Laurence. With these words, he adopted a strangely casual posture she had not seen before, leaning against the doorframe at a severe angle. He looked to her expectantly, and she struggled to conjure anything to hold his attention.

“Your...sister had a headache, so she went to have a rest in her room,” Alicia murmured.

Laurence shook his head slightly. “Indeed? Poor thing. She does have

a weak constitution at times, I'm afraid."

This conversation, having come to its conclusion, they lapsed once more into a decidedly not companionable silence. Alicia's fingers sought some pointless activity on the ragged threads at the edges of the armchair's upholstery, while Laurence made odd, quiet clicking sounds with his mouth.

"I...hope you do not mind that I have been here in your library," said Alicia listlessly after a few long moments.

"As I said, no trouble at all. But thank you." Smile.

"...Yes. And thank you as well."

Alicia had never been comfortable with moments of silence. Yet these long, empty stretches in their conversation bothered her more than usual—she felt as though she were doing something wrong by her host by not being able to drum up any suitable topic of conversation. Somehow she feared that he would think her snobbish, as if in her mind he were beneath her. It was a strange sensation that she had not experienced before, and she felt a bit resentful toward him for this, but she could not deny that she was compelled to devise some way to break the ice.

Yet what am I to talk with him about? cried a voice inside her. We know none of the same people, have none of the same experiences.

With the same surge of melancholy that always accompanied such memories, Alicia suddenly recalled some of the advice her mother had

given her during her long illness:

‘Every man in the world wants to discuss the same thing, Alicia: himself.’

“Your family has been here on this land for a long time, Mister Gillingham, haven’t they?” she asked, pushing aside the sad if useful memory.

He looked at her carefully, his head cocked gently to one side as a wild animal regarding an outstretched hand with scepticism. “You could say that,” said Laurence with a subtle grin. “My father farmed it until the day of his death, and his grandfather did the same. The Gillinghams are not an especially long-lived breed, so I cannot vouch for much further than that personally, but Granddad once told me we’ve been here on this spot for the last thousand years.”

Nodding enthusiastically, Alicia hazarded another advance in the conversation. “I...suppose this land must be especially good for farming, then?”

Leaving his position leaning against the doorframe, his large, strong body seemed immediately infused with energy at the question. He slapped the back of one hand against his open palm and grinned as though he had scored a point in a game of some kind. “That’s *exactly* what I’ve been saying! Why would our family stay here unless this part of the country were particularly well-suited to growing crops?”

“Why...yes, that seems to only be logical.”

“You would certainly think so! Yet that very matter has been a matter

of some debate in this part of the countryside. Some quite vigorous debate, especially with a friend of mine, a Mister James Barton.”

“Oh?”

Laurence eagerly sat in an open chair near hers without asking her leave—though in his house, Alicia was uncertain whether this would even be required—and leaned forward, his leg jiggling with excitement. “Some of our lot who have been off to university or have had salesmen pitching them some crooked product or another have got it in their heads that everything needs to be changed around for people to continue to live in our little part of the country. But, if you’ll excuse me for saying so, if you ask me that’s nothing but hogwash!”

“Really?” Alicia asked gamely.

Laurence gestured broadly, spreading his arms wide across the room. “You of anyone should be able to see it. When you came down the road yesterday, you saw the same thing every man here should be able to see with his own eyes—the land taking care of itself! The bees, the flowers, the animals, and trees, all of it comes together in harmony, just as it always has. And does that require some new, expensive equipment or scientific technique from the city?”

Alicia caught herself staring at the man’s massive hands and bulging muscles and murmured a wordless sign of agreement. From there Laurence continued to speak on, singing the praises of the land on which they stood. He departed from any subject she was able to follow almost immediately, but as best she could tell he was incredibly well versed in not only the best way to coax edible produce from his patch of land, but also its history, utility, and purpose for God and man.

Continuing to nod along with his words, Alicia found herself as mesmerized by his bearing and enthusiasm as she was lost by the content of what he was talking about. *I have never seen a man so bursting with love for anything!* she marvelled. His face contorted with passionate smiles and scowls, gestures that bespoke powerful emotions.

The effect was spellbinding, seeing those pale blue eyes flashing with such sheer, unadulterated life as he painted a picture with his words. Quite different from most of the men she found herself listening to, who tended to be as bland in their passions as they were uninterested in anything she had to say.

Eventually, he sat back in his chair, crossing one leg over the other and blinking as though waking from a daydream, and Alicia realized he was finished with his oration. He gave a warm, masculine chuckle. “But here I am carrying on like a magpie and not letting you get a word in. I hope you forgive my rudeness in dominating the conversation so.”

Alicia started, her breath catching in her throat. “N-no, not at all! I asked because I was curious to hear your thoughts.”

Laurence leaned his head forward conspiratorially. “Something you learn quickly out here in the country is that if given half a chance, a farmer will waste every minute of his day sharing his opinions about his farm with anyone fool enough to ask.” Alicia chuckled, once again admiring the way the man’s laughter at his own humour rang from the rafters and settled over the whole room like an embrace.

“But really,” Laurence said, rubbing his chin. “I already know more than enough about myself. I’d be much more interested in hearing about you, Miss Ramsbury.”

“About...me?” she asked, feeling another chill work its way down her spine.

“If it’s not being too forward, of course,” he added carefully. “If you haven’t noticed, I’m not terribly well informed on the manners required of a man speaking with a high society lady.”

“You are conducting yourself just...well, just fine, sir,” said Alicia, somewhat stiffly yet as honestly as she dared.

“That is good to hear. So...tell me about yourself. What is it that occupies your days, as I assume you are not usually so curious about the proper use of farmland?”

“Well,” Alicia began, her posture becoming rigid and uncomfortable. “Let’s see...where to begin...?”

A thousand things swirled through Alicia’s mind, yet she dared give voice to none of them. Her continuing sorrow over the loss of her parents, her lifelong struggle against her sister’s meddling, her worries for the future and how long their inheritance would support them, her frustrated participation in the comings and goings of London society... all of it seemed inappropriate to bring up to Laurence. Either he would not have any idea what she was talking about, or she would resemble exactly the kind of vapid socialite she could not stand.

Something about Mister Gillingham seems to inspire trust, she said to herself, licking her lips nervously. Yet I must remember that he is a stranger. I am miles from anywhere I know, anyone who really matters to me. And as kind as these people seem to be...I must take care, lest I put

myself in a compromised position.

“I’m afraid...there’s not much to tell,” she said coldly. She was not sure if she saw a flicker of disappointment pass across Laurence’s face, or if she really wished to see this for some reason.

“Oh,” he said quietly. “Well, then what do you think are—”

“If you will excuse me, Mister Gillingham,” said Alicia brusquely, rising from her chair. “I think I shall retire to my room for a rest. The...heat has me feeling rather weary.”

“Of course. Please, make yourself at—” answered Laurence with a note of concern in his voice, but before he could finish this sentiment Alicia had already fled from the room, dropping the book carelessly on the writing desk as she left.

“You bloody fool, Alicia Ramsbury,” she whispered as she lay atop her freshly made bed in all her clothes. “If there was a right thing to say, that certainly wasn’t it.”

If the chipped wooden ceiling above her head had anything to say to the contrary, it held its tongue.

Chapter 6

Making Amends

Laurence shook his head as he stepped out his door and onto his land, hoping that it would make him feel better as it almost always did. The land was in fine form this afternoon, with a flotilla of butterflies parading through the wildflowers that grew along the western wall of the barn. But the much-sought feeling of relief did not arrive.

As was his wont, then, Laurence decided to seek his comfort elsewhere—specifically, from the mouths of trusted friends.

“That Miss Ramsbury is an odd sort, Penelope,” he said, rubbing his chin in bewilderment. “Even for a high-society type of girl, she is awfully cold.”

As usual, his friends had little to say except for a handful of quacks and nips at Laurence’s heels. He reached down and petted the ducks’ heads fondly, ignoring Clio’s usual good-natured attempt to bite his fingers, then scattered an extra handful of corn for them to enjoy.

“I’m not sure why I’m so surprised,” Laurence murmured to himself. “City people are like that, I know, and if half of what Mary-Anne says on the subject is true, those high-class women are some of the most stuffy and particular people you could ever find.”

This pronouncement was met with another bout of furious quacking. Laurence frowned, imagining what his friends might have to say on

hearing him carry on like this. He was under no illusion that his animal friends were speaking to him in any meaningful way. Still, he found it cleared his mind to talk through problems and invent what his animals might give as reasonable replies based on their personalities.

“I just can’t imagine what goes through that woman’s head,” he muttered, walking over to the horse pens. “Here we were having what I thought was a lovely conversation, and then she goes all...fearful. Frozen, even. Doesn’t seem right, does it, Victoria?” he asked the chestnut brown mare.

Laurence considered the strange horse a moment longer as it chewed a mouthful of hay thoughtfully, then nodded and turned to walk away.

“I suppose you’re right,” Laurence said with a sad slump of his shoulders. “Here I was going on and on about the land and Devil-knows-what. The poor woman’s just had a terrible fright, and then I go nattering on about myself. Small wonder she looked so distracted while I was talking—she’s likely still terrified from the accident and farther from home and safety than she’s ever been. I know I wouldn’t be the most generous listener under conditions like that, either.”

Noticing the water trough for the cows was nearly empty, Laurence absently fetched another bucketful and dumped it in. He may as well have been walking through a dream, though, so consumed was he by these thoughts of his strange, beautiful houseguest.

“No, Bernadette, I don’t know why I care,” he explained in response to a curious moo from one of his cows. “She’s just staying for a day or so, and then she’ll be off and I won’t be seeing her ever again. She can believe what she likes for all it matters to me.”

The cow gave him a long, slow blink of her dark eyes. Laurence scowled, remembering the last time he had worked through one of his problems with the cows.

“No, I don’t want to hear it again, Bernadette,” snapped Laurence. “We’ve been down this road, and I most certainly don’t need to be spending my time and energy on finding myself a wife. Even if I did, it wouldn’t be right to make advances on a woman I’ve pledged to shelter and keep safe here under my roof.”

Gorgeous though she may be, he thought, afraid to give voice to this sentiment even to his animal companions.

Laurence sighed deeply and scratched Bernadette along her broad nose. “Why couldn’t it have been a withered crone who crashed on the road right outside my farm? That certainly would have been much simpler.”

“Sorry, Mister Gillingham, what did you say?” came a creaky old voice from out the open barn door. Laurence winced, realizing he had been overheard.

“Nothing, Dennis, thank you!” Laurence quickly glanced at each of his animal’s supplies of feed and water once more, then made his way out of the barn, closing the door behind him.

Time to put this behind me, he thought, returning to the fields in hopes of finding any other chores that might occupy his mind for the rest of the day. *Miss Ramsbury can be just as cold as she likes. She’ll get no argument from me, and that’s that.*

That, unfortunately, stubbornly refused to be that. Even as he was hard at work with his hands in the fields, Laurence was repeatedly stopped in his tracks by thoughts of Miss Ramsbury. As he mended the fences around the pasture, he nearly dropped his hatchet in surprise, thinking he saw Miss Ramsbury running toward him from the house. As he was seeing to the watering of the summer wheat he stopped in the middle of shouting direction to Dennis, as he could have sworn he heard her voice carrying to him on the wind.

When twilight came he thought he would stay out a bit longer to avoid having to continue his fruitless conversation with Alicia. But he found he was so distracted while cutting grass that he nearly took off a finger with his scythe, and it became clear there was no rescuing the day. With another heavy sigh, Laurence trudged back to the house, now cloaked in the velvety blue-orange of dusk as candles sprang up in the windows.

What on earth is the matter with me? Laurence thought with a frown as he scrubbed himself clean in the bathtub. Whether at work in the fields or enjoying the pleasures of the natural world, Laurence had always prided himself on his ability to leave his cares behind, absorbing himself fully in whatever occupied his time. Now it was as though he had a manacle clamped to his ankle, and extending from it a chain connecting him to...something.

Am I allowing myself to be weighed down by Miss Ramsbury, somehow? he wondered, concerned. *I cannot fathom why I should feel shackled to a woman I barely know. Or is this about more than just one unpleasant conversation? Perhaps there is something greater bothering me, something shaken out in our chat in the library...*

By the time Margaret's deep voice rang through the house announcing that supper was ready, Laurence was clean but still thoroughly confused, and beginning to worry about his own wellbeing. This unpleasant state led to him emitting a most uncharacteristic yelp when he nearly walked right into Alicia at the bottom of the stairs.

"Ex-excuse me, Alic-Miss Ramsbury," Laurence stammered, taking a hurried few steps back and nearly colliding with a grandfather clock. He was even more robbed of his usual composure as he was stricken by how appealing she looked dressed in a lilac-coloured gown he had not seen before. His bewilderment was made even more severe when it became clear that she had freshly been crying.

"No, it's..." Alicia said, clutching her hands together tightly and looking at the floor. She took a deep breath, then looked him in the eye. "It's for me to apologize, Mister Gillingham."

"It is?" he asked, one arm awkwardly propped against the tall grandfather clock.

"I fear I behaved most rudely before, in the library. Running off as I did...that was terribly discourteous of me, and I wish I had not done that."

Laurence felt his heart throb with sympathy. He reached out a hand to her in consolation and began to say, "No, I wasn't—"

But before he could get out another word Alicia sniffed and lifted her own small, delicate hand with a request to halt. "Please. I would just like to say this before I lose my nerve."

Why would she lose her nerve? Laurence's imagination churned with questions. Has she been crying just over running out of the room as she did? Did she do something truly wrong that I was too oafish to recognize? Did I?

Yet good sense won out and Laurence held his tongue. Giving Alicia a slight nod of agreement, she continued in a firm voice that shook at the edges of her words.

"I...have not been away from home like this before," she explained. "At least, not in the home of someone I do not know. It has been a difficult time for me of late—with my sister, with my parents' passing, travelling to Portsmouth, and confusion in my own life in London. I fear all I wanted was to return home and hide in my bed for ages. Really, that is still all that I want."

Alicia paused, and a single hot tear rolled down her flushed cheek. Laurence felt a surge of protectiveness roll up within him—though it contradicted the reality of their situation, with every beat of his heart he was filled with an impulse to comfort Alicia, to wrap her in his arms and keep her safe. Instead, respecting her request, he simply looked on in sombre silence.

Having collected herself, any further tears beaten back for the moment, Alicia took another breath and continued. "You and your sister are being so kind by taking me in for a short time. I feel like such an intruder in your house, and I fear I have given such a terrible account of myself already. Between how I first treated you when we met on the road yesterday, despite how kind and generous you were... and now, cutting our conversation in the library so terribly short... well, I hate the thought of you thinking me cold, or ungrateful, yet all I find I can do now is to beg your pardon for treating you so brusquely."

Seeing her look to him expectantly, Laurence allowed the words to leave his mouth at last. "It's nothing, Miss Ramsbury. I insist you have given no offence, and you are as welcome here as you ever were."

Seeing the relieved smile spread across Alicia's face gave Laurence a shiver down his spine that he could not explain, one that put an equal smile on his own lips.

"Perhaps, if it's not too much to ask..." she began coyly.

Nothing would be too much to ask, for you.

"Yes?" Laurence asked.

Alicia rocked back and forth on her toes in a playfully girlish posture. "Could we begin our acquaintance again? From the beginning? Only if that isn't too large or too silly a request."

Laurence grinned. "A chance to acquit myself as a bit less of a bumpkin? What man would turn down such an offer?"

They shared a relieved laugh, then Laurence gave his deepest, most exaggerated imitation of a high society bow as he could manage. "Mister Laurence Gillingham. At your service, my lady."

Alicia matched this greeting with a curtsy, delicately lifting her skirts

and dipping low to the ground. “Miss Alicia Ramsbury. *Enchanté.*”

Laurence gestured to the open doorway that led to the dining room, realizing suddenly that Margaret’s summons had gone unanswered for several long minutes now. “May I escort Miss Ramsbury in to supper?” He stifled a gasp when she stepped right next to him and wrapped her arm delicately around his, and side by side they walked into the dining room.

Though Laurence had been taken by surprise by Alicia’s request to renew their relationship from the beginning, it was immediately apparent that this was a wise way to proceed. The conversation they shared with Mary-Anne and Jenny over their hearty meal was downright dazzling. Over the course of three hours that passed like minutes, Laurence learned a great many things about Alicia Ramsbury and laughed harder than he could remember having done in a great while.

Whatever sorcery Alicia had brought about, it seemed to extend beyond the words they shared, as well. Her maid Jenny opened up about her own life in a very welcome manner, and Mary-Anne and Alicia seemed to connect most agreeably over their mutual impressions of London life.

Though, Laurence could not help noting Mary-Anne casting strange, meaningful glances his way every so often. *Surely just one of her usual games*, he told himself before his gaze would fly back to Alicia’s beautiful green eyes, the colour of iridescent mossy stones.

By the time he retired to bed, exhausted from the day’s work and all his emotional turmoil, Laurence felt as though a weight had been lifted from his shoulders. Sleep was a long while in coming, as every time he recalled Alicia’s shining face relating some anecdote or another at the table, he felt himself unable to stop smiling. Eventually,

he dropped off into a warm and pleasant slumber, his cares left in the past where they belonged.

Yet somehow, even in sleep, he felt a gentle tug at his ankle. That intangible chain was still clamped onto him, he sensed it from within his dreams. What this portended he could not begin to guess.

Chapter 7

Nature's Course

Alicia's eyes fluttered just as the rooster sounded its boastful song. If the bird had interrupted another frightful dream, it was one that passed into forgetfulness instantly, leaving Alicia with a smile on her face and a strange desire to breathe in the fresh morning air.

Springing from her bed, she stepped to the open window and looked out at the farmyard below. The sun was already climbing up into the shimmering blue, scattering its warm yellow rays onto all the trees and flowers beneath.

Off in the distance, beyond the copse of tall green trees that surrounded the house, Alicia could see a handful of men trudging off to the fields, one of them whistled a cheery tune. Though she could no more identify the song than she could guess what task the men were off to do, or name the trees and flowers that dazzled her with their beauty, she was nonetheless awestruck by the sight before her.

"What a morning!" she breathed to herself. It occurred to her vaguely that she would not have appreciated such things before arriving here just the other day, when...when she had...

And with that recollection the blissful amnesia of sleep flew from Alicia's mind all too swiftly. Even as she watched the cottony puffs of tiny clouds roll overhead in the vast blue sky, her mind treacherously poisoned the beauty before her with the realization that it was Tuesday.

Herbert left for the town—whatever was it called?—on Sunday, the day of the crash, Alicia thought, retreating from the window to sit heavily on the side of the bed. *Whatever could be taking him so long?*

Her imagination, as ever, was ready with a vast supply of misfortunes that could befall one. Herbert could have been abducted or killed by bandits—he was a gentle man, and would not put up much of a fight, surely. His horse could have thrown a shoe, and Herbert forced to walk the fifty miles to his destination. Perhaps he was lost and wandered the woods, helpless and hungry...or perhaps he had found and procured a replacement carriage, yet was unable to find his way back to where Alicia was now, and her rescue was nearby yet out of reach. And then, of course, there was always the prospect that he had been attacked by wolves, bears, boars, wild bulls, or any of a hundred perils of the countryside.

Whatever it is that has waylaid him is immaterial, she thought with a heavy sigh. *Today I really must write Grace, lest she do something foolish like declare me dead or missing before all of London society. And, I suppose, it would be the right thing to do so she does not worry after my safety.*

Though Alicia had no doubt she had the right of it, it was not until after a leisurely breakfast with Jenny and Mary-Anne when she finally got around to the task at hand, spurred along by much encouragement from her two companions. She sat at the writing desk in a study near the entryway of the house, took a deep breath, and began to scratch out her missive.

Dear Grace,

Her pen paused there, dripping a blob of ink onto the fresh sheet of

paper. Muttering a curse, Alicia dabbed away the ink from her pen and stopped in thought.

Whatever it is I say, Grace will surely blame me for this, she sighed. Then, in a rush of pique, this thought gave her some reassurance in her task. *If she will be cross with me no matter what I say, then there's surely no need to be excessively careful with what I say. I may as well just tell her the truth and let any resentment at what I say be entirely Grace's business.*

She dabbed her quill in the inkwell and began again:

I hope this message finds you well. After an unfortunate misadventure with our family carriage—we hit a stone in the road so violently that the front of the carriage was destroyed completely! I find myself stranded for a time in the countryside to the south of London. Herbert has gone to fetch someone to repair or replace the carriage from the nearest town. In the meantime, I am lodged temporarily at the home of a Mister Laurence Gillingham, a very—

Alicia stopped there, suddenly unsure how much to share about her host's identity. She found she had only good things to say about the man, yet she knew how brightly the flame of Grace's envy burned, and feared she might antagonize her sister with anything but a simple description.

—a very the brother of Missus Edward Stanhope of Whitehall. He is a farmer, and a respected member of the community of Dunwood. He and his sister are treating me with great hospitality for my short stay.

Alicia halted to consider whether or not to give her regrets to Mister Woodruff, her would-be opera companion. Shaking her head, she

concluded with an appeal to Grace's better nature, should she suddenly discover she had one.

I assure you that I am in good health and will be returned to London within a few days, hopefully not more than a few hours after you receive this letter. Until that time, dear sister, please be well, and I look forward to returning to our home safely.

—*Your Loving Sister,*

Alicia Ramsbury

Before she could second-guess herself yet again, Alicia threw the pen back in the inkwell, blew on the paper to dry the ink, and folded the letter closed. She quickly passed it to Margaret, the Gillinghams' faithful if quiet cook and cleaning woman, along with instructions for its delivery and a handful of coins to repay her son for his trouble.

There, Alicia thought, dusting her hands with a brief, brave moment of satisfaction. *Now there is nothing to do but wait.*

Then she glanced at the grandfather clock in the entryway with trepidation. The dusty old object looked to have been frozen in time at least a century ago, though by Laurence's insistent winding of the thing she assumed it must still be in some semblance of working order.

I wonder just how much longer I shall find myself waiting? And how much longer I can bear it?

Alicia was unsure if two consecutive days were sufficient to say that she had established a routine. But once again, Jenny and Mary-Anne retired for a rest not long after midday. And just as the previous afternoon had found her staring into space listlessly in the upstairs library, so too did this one.

Unfortunately, today her thoughts were much more occupied with dread than with curiosity. Try as she might, she was unable to reconcile writing a letter to her sister to apprise her of her circumstances—by all accounts the just and proper thing to do—with her faith that Grace would most assuredly continue to lash out at her for everything said and unsaid in the letter.

It was not your fault, Alicia, she reminded herself, chin resting on her fist glumly. There was nothing you could have done to prevent it. You are not responsible for your sister's dissatisfaction with her own—

A soft rapping came on the open door. Alicia sat up straighter, craning her neck to see who was there, and smiled softly that her suspicions were correct. *'Every day is much like another here,' indeed,* she thought, recalling Mary-Anne's words.

"Good afternoon, Mister Gillingham," she greeted Laurence.

"Good afternoon yourself, Miss Ramsbury," he returned. Once again he surveyed the room with a polite smile. "No Shakespeare today, I see?"

She noted his eyes dart to her fingers. Following his gaze, she saw that she had been unknowingly worrying the hem of her skirt nearly into tatters, her hands reflecting all the trepidation that had passed through her mind. She released her hem and folded her hands in her lap, looking away from Laurence and fighting an inexplicable rush of embarrassment.

After a long moment of quiet—one that was, thankfully, less interminable than yesterday's—Laurence began to speak in a concerned voice. "I had been thinking..." he said.

Alicia looked up at him expectantly.

"I would not like to presume, and I know you are awaiting news from your Mister Place. But...well, my dear mother always used to tell me something about a watched pot never boiling."

Alicia smiled. "My mother said the same thing."

"That being the case, if you are in want of something to watch other than your boiling pot...perhaps I could show you around the land for a time?"

Seeing the evident confusion on her face, he continued with a good-natured chuckle. "Only if it's something you're interested in, of course. Having patiently listened to me go on and on about it yesterday, I thought you might enjoy getting to see some of the farm. I could show you how your Victoria is getting along with the rest of the animals, maybe even see if the honeysuckle is blooming down by the pond?"

He pressed his advance, leaning forward with a dreamy smile. "It may not be the equal of an expensive salon or whatever else you and Mary-Anne do all day, but I can guarantee it's a fine way to spend an afternoon—much better than sitting around here in a dusty room by yourself, certainly."

Alicia found herself smiling, brought back to the innocent pleasure she experienced when looking over the view from her window this morning. She knew that each activity he mentioned would be full of dirt and powerful smells, yet to hear him describe it she thought it sounded strangely appealing. Especially recalling how clearly in love with the land he seemed to be in their previous conversation. And, as Alicia looked at the hopeful expression on Laurence's face, the prospect of getting to spend a few hours alone with him provoked an odd sensation from somewhere deep within her...

Before she could open her mouth to accept this invitation, she drew in a sharp breath. As nice as his proposal was, there were a hundred common sense reasons to refuse.

Inside the house where you are staying is one thing, but it would be absolutely scandalous to be seen walking about outside with an unmarried man.

You do not know this man. Not really. For all you know, he could be capable of anything.

You would need to find Jenny and get her to accompany you. That would be the only way it would be either safe or proper.

“I would love to,” said Alicia, rising from her chair.

Laurence smiled and led the way out the door—Alicia followed, leaving her common sense behind in the dust.

* * *

With a sly grin, Laurence paused with one hand on the ajar barn doors. “Now, you’ll have to promise not to take anything you hear inside here too seriously. I’m afraid the ladies of Gillingham are terrible gossips.”

Unsure of just what she was being told, Alicia giggled and nodded as amiably as she could. Laurence threw open the barn door, releasing an enormous wave of foul-smelling something out over the grass. Alicia fought not to retch as the stench was drawn into her lungs, but seeing her host not even register the odour, she steeled herself and stepped in after him.

“Miss Ramsbury, may I introduce you to some of our farm’s residents?” He gestured to various pens, naming each animal to her in turn. Alicia was overwhelmed by the cacophony that emerged. It was surely her imagination, but it seemed almost as though each pig, each duck, each hen, and goat they passed raised their voice in greeting to their master.

Penelope? Clio? Wait a moment... She mouthed the names of the animals again, then smiled with recognition. *He really is quite an avid reader, isn't he? And a lover of the classics, no less!* “You name all your animals yourself, then?” she asked with a coy smile.

Laurence gave an odd tilt to his head, as though no one had ever asked him about this before. “Some of them, certainly. Agatha and Bernadette are getting a bit long in the tooth, so to speak—I’m fairly sure Mary-Anne was the one to name them, back when the milking used to be her responsibility.”

She snorted at the image, following Laurence to the horse pens and following his lead in petting the beasts’ soft fur. “I find it difficult to picture Mary-Anne doing such dirty farm work.”

“Oh, don’t let her high-flown ways fool you,” Laurence chuckled. “Her nose wasn’t always stuck so high in the air. When we were growing up Mary-Anne was the loudest-shouting, fastest-running tomboy in the county. She was so frequently covered in mud and grime Mother used to threaten to make her sleep in the pigpen.”

Alicia gave a half-smile, sensing dark thoughts loom over her once more. “You and Mary-Anne have such a lovely friendship, you know.”

He gave a short, dismissive if mirthful laugh at this. “Well, we are siblings, whatever our disagreements from time to time. Besides, we complement one another’s personalities. She likes to think that she keeps me from growing too big-headed, and I let her go on thinking that.”

The joke was a funny one, but Alicia did not laugh. Instead, her eyes fixed on some insignificant mote of dust in the air before them, her fingers still scratching Victoria’s muzzle.

“I really did not want to write my sister today, you know.”

Alicia felt Laurence stiffen beside her. "Is that...so?" he asked, unsure.

She clarified, with a humourless laugh. "I know that must make me sound outright monstrous. I am...just so very sure she will find some way to blame me for the carriage accident. As if I caused it purely to inconvenience her or to waste our family's money."

"But surely that's ridiculous!"

Alicia nodded sadly. "Surely. Yet that is her way. It always has been, for as long as I can remember."

She frowned, unsure why she had decided to allow herself to divulge such a private matter to this stranger. Yet the floodgates were open, and she heard herself continue to loose the miseries that she had always kept locked within herself.

"She and I have never gotten along. I know it's silly to say, really, we were just children. But my first memories of Grace are of being shouted at or poked with a hatpin, and I have precious few pleasant memories of her at all."

She felt tears dripping down her cheeks now, a steady trickle that matched the flow of words she loosed in the vast barn. Still Laurence listened silently as her hands moved, steady and unceasing, against Victoria's sleek brown coat.

"I really expected that when Mother died things might be different. As

though somehow, after this terrible tragedy, everything about Grace might suddenly be different.” She shrugged and blew out an exasperated sigh. “I suppose I thought she might stop thinking we have to compete with one another for Mother’s affection. But it grew worse then, if anything. And worse still, after Father died this year.”

That was where Alicia put an end to her lamentations. Not because there was no more to say—while Grace’s various cruelties and ill treatment had never been truly horrific, they had certainly been varied over the years—but because she suddenly felt very tired, and lacked the wherewithal to continue.

“That’s...truly a terrible thing, Miss Ramsbury,” said Laurence softly. “I’m very sorry to hear it. If I had known, I certainly would not have —”

“It’s all right,” Alicia answered.

That terrible blanket of silence fell over the two of them once again. Alicia shuddered gently, though the barn was a warm and stuffy place, and found herself wishing she could be held and comforted by someone—but that was impossible.

“Here, let me show you—” Laurence said, stepping so close Alicia could practically feel him breathing next to her.

She jerked her head up to look the man in the eye, then felt all her hairs stand on end as he took her pale, thin hand in his own. “What are—” she began to ask, but her protests caught helplessly in her throat.

He guided her hand up to a spot behind Victoria's ear as though to demonstrate a particular favourite scratching place, but Alicia found herself suddenly unable to follow what it was he had intended. Her heart began beating hard enough to block out the constant animal noise, and she became more aware of every fine detail on the man's large, rough hand than she had of any object she had touched in her life.

His hand is so big, she thought, looking at his fingers curled around hers. And though it is covered in callouses, the way it guides my own hand is so gentle, almost tender.

Alicia suddenly realized that Laurence had stopped in his demonstration, and no longer seemed to be explaining the finer points of horse spoiling. She looked up into his eyes to see that he was already looking at her, a blush coming to his already ruddy cheeks.

Whether or not he felt the same quiver at the touch of their skin that Alicia felt ignite within her—that she could not say. All she knew is that they both looked away at that moment, then hurriedly made some excuse to continue their walk elsewhere.

Chapter 8

People Will Talk

“Laurence, you wool-headed miscreant!”

Laurence looked up from his seat on a stump in front of the house, where he had been taking a moment to trim a length of rope for use in the barn. A cunning smile spread across his face at the sight of the lanky man with an unruly beard strolling down the path in his direction.

“James!” Laurence laughed, rising to meet his friend and setting his work on the stump. “Haven’t found anywhere better to beg for your supper tonight, eh?”

The men exchanged a hearty handshake, slapping one another on the back in their usual ritual greeting. Without releasing Laurence’s hand, James began bobbing his head in all directions, as though trying to look into the house a few dozen yards off.

“Lose something?” Laurence asked, pulling his hand free.

“No, but you seem to have,” said Laurence snidely. “Didn’t I hear you had a certain lovely young houseguest? Or have you misplaced her along with that twenty pence you still owe me from last month’s market?”

Laurence shot a glance back to the house. Margaret's cooking fire was still burning strong, judging by the thin stream of smoke drifting up from the kitchen chimney. "I need to bring in the goats from the back pasture. Walk with me."

"Sounds fine to me," said James, removing a pipe from the pouch at his hip. "I need a smoke anyway, and that sister of yours has made it quite clear how dangerous a habit it is...if I do it in front of her, at least."

With a grin, Laurence clapped a hand on the back of his friend as they walked down the well-worn path toward the farm's hilly northern patch of grass. "It's good to see you, James."

This was met with a hearty chortle. "Either it's been so long since I've visited you've forgotten how bad a houseguest I am or you must be even more turned-around than they're saying," James replied, stuffing a bit of tobacco into his handmade pipe. "Thank you either way, though."

Laurence's stride slowed. "What do you mean, 'more turned-around than they're saying?' Who's saying things?"

"Come now, Laurence, you know as well as I do that the farmers around here don't have anything they'd rather do than gossip, and the fishwives over in Dunwood are no better. I expect half the town knew about what's happened by midday yesterday."

"And just what has happened, pray tell?" Laurence asked, his voice uncharacteristically tinged with sarcasm.

James stopped in place. With his pipe held in his mouth and both hands fussing with his spill and tinder, all he could do in answer was roll his eyes and gesture helplessly.

“Miss Ramsbury’s carriage suffered an accident on her way home to London,” Laurence said, pacing in a slow yet aggravated circle around his friend. “She is staying here with Mary-Anne and me just for a day or two, until her driver can get the carriage fixed.”

Pipe still clenched between his teeth, James mutely waggled his eyebrows suggestively, still struggling to light his tinder.

“Urgh,” Laurence grunted, scowling as he turned on his heels and began pacing in the opposite direction. “I can only imagine what mad stories people have been inventing down at the White Hare in spite of the facts. Probably something entirely depraved—entirely a product of their own filthy imaginations, mind you. And no doubt helped along in their fabrication by a Mister James Barton in exchange for another round of ale.”

“Prfl,” said James around the pipe. Frustrated, Laurence grabbed the pipe and yanked it out of James’ mouth, earning him a grateful smile and a repetition: “Piffle, I say. And while our countrymen may be bored enough to repeat such calumnies, no one is fool enough to believe any of it. Don’t suppose you have a candle anywhere?”

Laurence shook his head and thrust the pipe into his friend’s hands, then resumed walking toward the pasture with a huff. “Can’t do a good deed for another without being punished for it,” he muttered under his breath, ignoring the sound of James hurriedly packing away his pipe and jogging after him.

“Really, Laurence, don’t take it so personally. People will talk. It’s just a bit of something to do, nothing wrong with that.”

“Maybe to you lot down at the pub,” Laurence said out of the side of his mouth. “Miss Ramsbury is a real woman with a real reputation that I’m sure she wouldn’t appreciate you dragging through the mud for your sport.”

Now walking alongside him, dancing around and over the weeds and low bushes that lined the path, James put a friendly hand on Laurence’s shoulder. “Well, you have a friendly ear beside you so you can set the record straight. Two of them, in fact.”

Laurence stopped in his tracks, sending his friend wheeling about to avoid crashing into a nearby tree. He blew out a heavy sigh and lowered his shoulders, trying to shake out the tension that had cropped up in his sore muscles. “I’m sorry, James,” he said in a voice heavy with resignation, looking down at the dirt path. “I know you’re just having a bit of fun. Of course you’re not responsible for people talking. And besides, there’s nothing to the rumours anyway, so why should it matter what people—”

He burst out laughing, looking up to see James was mimicking his serious expression. “Will you stop making that dreadful face, you buffoon!” he chuckled, swinging out a hand in a friendly punch.

“Right away, just as soon as you do,” James replied. “So what has been going on, then, Farmer Laurence?”

His mood much improved, Laurence told James all about the

circumstances that had led to Alicia staying with him. Avoiding some of the details of her conflict with her sister, he excitedly narrated everything about the carriage crash, about taking her around the property earlier that day and how much fun he had had telling her about all the wild and cultivated plants in the area, how she made him laugh so hard when they had capered across the field, leaping over holes or cow pats. How she had just gone up for a rest before supper when James had arrived. Laurence hardly noticed when they reached the pasture, continuing his chatter as they stood by the edge of the green, grassy hill.

When his words finally seemed to have run their course, Laurence gave James a careful glance and saw a curious smile on his lips. "So you see?" Laurence added, demanding some sort of confirmation. "All perfectly innocent. Just putting up a young lady in distress."

James coughed gently, his eyes darting away. "Yes, absolutely. And... frolicking with her in a field. As one does."

"Taking her mind off her anxious waiting," Laurence said insistently.

"Of course, of course." James' eyes rolled here and there playfully, a smirk on his face. "I'm sure it's all nothing, really. Besides, I imagine she is most unpleasant to look at, a pale little city thing like her. All elbows and teeth, I'm sure."

"Absolutely not!" Laurence protested, a flush coming to his cheeks. "She's...well, she is a lovely young lady. Green eyes like summer grass, and very...well-proportioned." His flush deepened, though he was not sure whether this was due to continued offence on Alicia's behalf or embarrassment at his own lack of appropriate words to describe her.

“Ah, yes, yes, naturally, my mistake,” said James, putting up his hands as if pacifying a raging bull. “All looks, then, not a thought in her head except for how to manage her beauty. I’ve known the type—those high society city ladies are all the same.”

“No, that’s not right,” said Laurence, feeling himself deflate somewhat. “She’s...well, she’s interested in all sorts of things. Plays and literature and travel. She was full of so many questions today when we walked around the farm. I don’t think I’ve ever known anyone quite so curious.”

James’ wide smile practically beamed despite his yellowish teeth. “Why, she sounds a most wonderful young lady indeed. It sounds as though you’re rather fond of the girl already, hmm?”

Laurence blinked, suddenly stricken by what he had been saying. Shaking his head in consternation, he turned and walked off to get to his task of bringing the sheep back to the barn for the night. “Jog on, you ninny,” he tossed over his shoulder, sending James off in a fit of laughter.

* * *

Laurence focused all of his attention on keeping the storm cloud of irritation leashed firmly to his side, though James, as ever, did not make it easy. Still, every time his long—time friend cut a caper or made some idiotic joke, Laurence would stop himself from gratifying the buffoon with a smile by reminding himself how offended he should be by the man’s implications.

There’s nothing wrong with offering a lady in trouble your hospitality, he

would think, turning away from James and trying half-heartedly to focus on some invented pre-supper chore. *I simply cannot fathom why James would not correct those windbags at the pub and stop that horrible slander. He knows I'd never take advantage of a guest, no matter how winsome she might be.*

Then his mind would flash back to the feeling of her hand in his while they were in the barn earlier that day. At these thoughts Laurence would feel a strange sensation of warmth in his ears, and the leash on his ire would begin to slacken before he pulled it back with a more insistently furrowed brow.

Still, he thought with some perverse satisfaction, he was glad he was able to maintain his bad mood more or less intact by supptime. Even as he listened to James and Mary-Anne banter back and forth in front of Alicia and Jenny, who paid great if quiet interest to these friends' vigorous rehashing of decades-old disputes.

"I still say there was no way it *wasn't* you who released that pig into the meeting hall, James Barton."

"And I should certainly be happy to confess to such," said James, waggling a bit of potato at Mary-Anne from the end of his fork. "Just as soon as anyone is able to present any evidence of my supposed involvement."

"Right when Deirdre had just been gotten into her wedding dress, too, if you can believe it," Mary-Anne explained to Alicia with an exasperated smile. "Has he no shame at all?"

"Mary-Anne, you are entirely too intelligent to ask such a stupid question," James replied, waggling his eyebrows. "Either that, or I am

a far poorer judge of character than I let myself believe.”

Laughter rang from the rafters as Alicia and Jenny joined in the merriment that maddeningly pierced Laurence’s scowl. Not for the first time he envied Margaret and Dennis, who took their own supper in the kitchen or carried it back to their homes to eat in peace. Even eating in the barn would be less bothersome than this.

“Just what is your profession, Mister Barton?” asked Alicia as she helped herself to another portion of fresh summer peas. Laurence tried to suppress a wince.

“Our Mister Barton is something of an artist, you might say,” said Mary-Anne with a stoic expression Laurence had long since learned concealed what she surely thought would be a terrific joke.

Alicia, on the other hand, was still unused to his sister’s ways, and her eyes brightened at this proclamation. “Really?” she asked James, smiling. “Are you a painter, then? Some of Mister Constable’s works are quite beautiful, and I understand he was inspired by the English countryside much like this area.”

James brayed with laughter, giving Mary-Anne a rough nudge on the arm with his fist. “That’s not my medium, I’m afraid. Not much with a brush, you see.”

“It’s just a silly jape,” said Laurence into his plate, perhaps a bit more grimly than he felt. “James is a farmer, like me.”

“Nobody’s a farmer like *you*,” James said snidely as Mary-Anne

adopted a look of mock surprise.

“I had no idea you had lost your vocation, Mister Barton!” she said with wide eyes, reaching out a hand in sympathy to James. “Please, tell me they have not ended your residency at the White Hare! I’ve heard from some of the leading art critics that you were beginning to do some of your best work on the theme of ‘gossip and beer.’”

James reached out to slap Mary-Anne’s hand playfully, but she pulled it away just in time. “Why, you might have to actually return to working in the field!” Mary-Anne laughed. “Such a shameful thing, and all because you have the poor luck to be a farmer!”

Laurence rolled his eyes at this display, and tried to put it out of his mind as his gaze fell to Alicia. She seemed to have recovered completely from the doldrums she had been in earlier, and from her emotional outburst in the barn. Now, in fact, she seemed more relaxed and comfortable than ever, her brow unfurrowed, eyes bright and smiling. Laurence could not help but notice just how beautiful she looked when untroubled like this.

Then he could not mask his surprise when she turned her smiling face to his, looking to him with an expression of ease and happiness he had not seen from her before. His pet cloud of anger slipped its leash immediately and escaped up the chimney.

“If Mister Barton really is as much of a rascal as your sister claims—” Alicia began to ask him.

“I’m not!” James interjected.

“You are so, and don’t interrupt,” Mary-Anne put in.

“I’m at least *twice* that much of a rascal!”

“Shh.”

If Alicia was anything other than tickled by this interjection, she gave no sign, continuing her inquiry to Laurence. “I’m certain you have a fair few stories of his exploits.”

Over James’ muttered protests and Mary-Anne’s encouragement, Laurence couldn’t help but finally crack a smile at Alicia’s request.

“Oh, certainly. James and I have known each other since we were children. His misadventures in these parts are the stuff of legends—legends he mostly spins himself down at the White Hare.”

“Legends, *that’s* my medium!”

It didn’t take more than a moment for Laurence to recall and begin retelling a sufficiently scandalous tale of a young James Barton’s brief dalliance with serving as an altar boy at the local church. By the time he got to the part about what James had done to the priest’s cassock, the whole room was in stitches, their supper largely forgotten.

“In my defence, I did tell Father Hamlin that the miraculous image of Saint Ives had just been a muddy imprint of my own face,” James

sighed, finishing his last swallow of beer. “Eventually, anyway.”

“Not before he’d written the bishop about this ‘holy relic,’” Mary-Anne corrected him.

“That’s absolutely wretched!” Alicia laughed. “What a wonderful story...and very well told, I might add.” Laurence beamed at this praise, taking a heady breath of the warm summer air that suffused the dining room.

“But of course *you* never engaged in any such foolishness, Mister Gillingham?” Alicia asked with a coy smile. Laurence swallowed, disarmed once more by her long eyelashes and dimpled cheeks and—

“Laurence Gillingham? Foolishness? Hah!” James exclaimed. He leaned forward on his elbows as though sharing some secret wisdom. “Since before he could walk this one has been on a mission to put the rest of us to shame with his upright character.”

“I don’t—” Laurence began to say.

“Surely his character can’t be as perfect as all that,” Alicia laughed. “After spending so much time around the two of you?”

“Mister Barton does have a flair for exaggeration, as you might have noticed,” sighed Mary-Anne. “Though in this case he is depressingly accurate. Laurence’s boringness may be referred to as moral fibre with only some small stretch of the imagination.”

“It’s a small wonder he’s the most sought-after bachelor in the whole of Dunwood!” pronounced James as he rested a hand on Laurence’s shoulder. Laurence shook it off, making an expression that he hoped might demonstrate how preposterous this claim really was.

“Oh, deny it all you like, but I hear what all the girls say whenever they come by the White Hare,” James continued. “Always asking after Laurence Gillingham, wanting to bring him pies or ask him to some country dance or other.”

“I find it most touching that you make time to follow such matters, what with your ‘art’ taking up so much of your time,” said Alicia with a smile.

“Indeed, it is a sacrifice! But I bear such love for my friend Laurence that I’ll stay at the pub all day if I must do so to protect his sterling reputation.”

This last word was shot at Laurence with a sarcastic raised eyebrow, but Laurence barely heard it as he pushed his chair back, trying not to blush as the other members of the party laughed uproariously.

Leave it, Laurence, he doesn’t mean anything by it, he told himself as he rose to clear the dishes from the table. Some men just never get over their troublemaking ways. It’s just more of his usual nonsense—surely there’s nothing to it.

Nothing at all.

Chapter 9

Giving and Receiving

Alicia was in the woods again. She knew she had been here before, though she could not recall exactly when. She bit her lip, aware that she had no idea where she was or where she was going.

But as tall and shadowy as the pines that surrounded her, strangely, she felt very little fear, and a considerable portion of curiosity. Nestled among the high branches she saw bird's nests from which came strange, musical songs she had never heard before. And somehow until now she had not noticed that under each of the trees was a little copse of mushrooms and wildflowers.

Hearing slow, gentle footsteps behind her, Alicia turned to see bright eyes advancing towards her, stepping out of the shadows to reveal a large, shaggy wolf. Though she took a step back in alarm, the wolf showed no menace and came forward to tamely sniff at her hand.

Surprised but still unafraid, Alicia reached forward to pet the beast on the head as though it were a familiar dog. The wolf looked up into her eyes, and she saw something familiar reflected in those lunar silver irises.

When the birdsong was interrupted by the siren call of the rooster, she woke with more disappointment than panic.

From the moment her eyes fluttered open, her dream already forgotten, Alicia felt that things were different.

Just as the day before she jumped from her bed and breathed in the cool blue-yellow morning air that poured through her open window. Whether the cock had crowed earlier than usual or she had simply heard it, Alicia could see the sun was still barely peeking over the horizon, and though she knew she had stayed late into the night sharing stories and laughter with her hosts and their visitor Mister Barton, she felt as though she had never been so well-rested in her life.

I know I should be worried about Grace, she thought, watching the larks dart and swoop over the eaves of the barn. *And about wherever Herbert could be.*

Yet despite her conscious recollection of her worries, they felt almost as though they belonged to someone else. Before Alicia knew what she was doing, she was dressed and coming down the stairs, passing Jenny still sleeping peacefully in her chair. For whatever reason, the day seemed too beautiful and precious to waste fretting about faraway cares.

The ground floor of the house was as quiet and empty as it had been when Alicia trudged off to bed the night before, and from the clear earthy smell the house it seemed no one had lit a fire for breakfast yet. Alicia quietly stepped through the downstairs rooms of the house, confirming her suspicions.

Surprising herself yet again, Alicia hugged her arms around herself, savouring the feeling of freedom that suddenly suffused her. *I wonder what I should do?* she thought, then corrected herself. *What I want to do, that is. There's nothing in particular I need to do, and that is a feeling to be enjoyed while it lasts.*

So for once I need to figure out for myself, instead of letting Grace or Mother and Father or any of 'society' determine for me: what is it I want to do?

This thought was punctuated by a chorus of quacking that wafted through the open window from the direction of the barn. Alicia smiled, thinking she might have some idea of how she would like to spend her morning.

* * *

Alicia had rather meant to surprise Laurence during his chores. Seized by a strange playful urge, she had thought she would sneak up behind him, concealing her presence in the barn until she was right beside the man so she could give him a fright with her sudden appearance.

But that was hardly how it turned out.

In fact, Alicia had hardly made it halfway into the barn before Laurence noticed her—alerted by some unknowable difference in the constant lowing and chirruping of his animals, she guessed. And as soon as he wheeled about to look at her, she stopped in her tracks, utterly frozen.

Standing in a column of morning sunlight pouring in through the open loft doors, the gentle summer breeze swirling motes of golden dust around him, Laurence looked more like a divine being than a man. His tanned, masculine face was ringed in a halo of golden light, his eyes flashing as they studied her carefully. The dirt that stained his trousers and the bestial chorus that surrounded him made him appear less a country yahoo and more a spirit of the land, some potent heathen icon

of fertile masculine power.

Her lighthearted deception now spoiled, Alicia drew her posture straight to greet Laurence properly. But then that damnable smile came to his face.

That peculiar grin conveyed something she could not quite place, which caught her so off guard every time it was trained in her direction. While it could be described as both patient and welcoming, it was not what she would call a *polite* smile, nor a patronizing one—Alicia had certainly seen enough of each of these over her years in London.

Nor was it one of unguarded friendliness, quite, nor of unqualified admiration or respect. Somehow it seemed to her to have all those qualities wrapped up in a fascinating puzzle of an expression. Whatever was intended by Laurence's smile, the effect was the same as always: she lost her words yet again.

Moving graciously into the silence between them, without setting down the feed pail under his arm, Laurence inclined his head in a slight greeting and said, "Good morning, Miss Ramsbury."

Through a herculean effort, Alicia's lip only quivered once before she set her chin and answered, "G-good morning, Mister Gillingham."

Idiotic girl, why are you behaving like a tongue-tied child? Alicia chastised herself, her eyes darting about awkwardly. *For goodness' sake, this is the same man you've been speaking with for two days now—why should he strike you so different today?* She knew she had even seen Laurence in his element like this before—just yesterday, though it felt like ages since she had bared her soul about her own familial problems to the

man. Why was she suddenly so awestruck at the sight of him?

Again he swooped in to intervene. "If you're looking for another tour of the land, I'm afraid it will have to wait. I really must get these chores finished before breakfast." Laurence gestured to the baying beasts and fowl around them. "They get right cranky when they don't get their own breakfast promptly. Much like Mary-Anne, I've found."

Struggling to compose herself and quell the happy bubbling sensation within her abdomen, Alicia released a slight giggle at this last joke before she managed to firm her resolve. "No, I don't...I wasn't asking for..."

Words failing her, she blushed as she saw Laurence's smile widen at the sight of her struggle. She looked away, but then her eyes fell on Laurence's broad, muscular chest that peeked through his open collar, which hardly helped matters.

Get ahold of yourself, girl! Alicia shook her head and tried again, keeping her eyes aimed at the hay-covered floor. "Actually, I was hoping I could be of some help," she said softly.

"What?"

She looked up at him to see Laurence was cupping an ear with his free hand. He gestured to the noise of the animals crying for their food and shrugged pleasantly.

In a louder voice, Alicia repeated, "I was hoping I could help! With..." she gestured vaguely toward the animals' pens and various rusty farm

implements. "You and Mary-Anne have been so generous toward me, and I...wanted to help. To earn my keep, as it were."

His smile growing slightly more pained, Laurence stepped closer to her as he set down his pail. "That's very kind of you, Miss Ramsbury, but it really isn't necessary. We don't—"

"I know," she replied, holding her hands up in appeasement. "This is not from any sense of obligation. You have given what you have so freely, and I know you do not expect any kind of return...nor will I be able to make good on my intentions with whatever meagre labour I can contribute."

"Then surely you would have a more pleasant time resting indoors? You are welcome to the library, if I haven't already—"

Alicia raised a finger to stop his protestations and was mildly surprised when he stopped right away. She drew a breath, realizing somehow he was now only an arm's reach away. Smiling and looking up into those blue eyes, she said as lightly as she could manage, "As I said. I don't think I need to help. I *want* to help."

Something passed between her eyes and his then. As far as she could tell neither of them blinked nor breathed, though it felt like an eternity transpired before, with a friendly nod, Laurence said, "All right. Here, why don't you help me feed the horses? Your Victoria will be happy to see you, I have no doubt."

Alicia felt a surge of pride and relief bring new life to her limbs. A spring in her step, she followed Laurence, resisting the odd impulse to take his hand as he showed her to where she would begin her tasks.

“Well!” exclaimed Mary-Anne from her chair in the entryway as she gave Alicia a long, thorough up-and-down. For the first time since Alicia had met her, the young woman looked genuinely surprised. “I was going to ask what the two of you have been up to this morning, but it seems rather a foolish question at this point.”

Glancing down at herself, Alicia saw the accumulation of dirt and dander that had built up on her lovely blue dress. It occurred to her that at another time she might have been quite distraught at the sight—the dress had cost her a pretty penny from her allowance, she recalled, though strangely she could remember neither the price nor where she had procured it.

“Yes, Miss Ramsbury was a terrific help with the chores this morning,” said Laurence as he stepped in around her. “Unlike some houseguests, I could mention.”

“Houseguest! Is that any way to refer to your sister?” Mary-Anne snapped, her hip cocked at a saucy angle. “Especially when she has been slaving away over a hot cook fire to prepare everyone breakfast. Which has been sitting cold for over an hour now, I might point out.”

Laurence opened his mouth to protest, then glanced at the grandfather clock as it chimed ten o'clock. He frowned in puzzlement. “Must have forgotten to wind that clock at some point...or... It isn't really that late, is it?”

“Excuse me,” said Alicia as she stepped past the quarrelling siblings

toward the stairs. "I think I had better wash up for breakfast."

Though her muscles ached in a way that was entirely new to her, Alicia was a frenzy of energy as she rushed up the stairs to her room, breezing past a half-awake Jenny without saying a word.

Catching sight of herself in the mirror, Alicia noticed at once that she had only seen the half of the state she was in. Besides the streaks of mud and whatever else staining her dress, she had half a haystack's worth of straw sticking out of her hair at every angle. Her cheeks were flushed, her skin damp and sticky with sweat. Though she realized she would normally be scandalized to be seen in such a condition, all she could do at the moment was to burst out in laughter.

The laughter subsided after a good few moments, and Alicia drew a shaky breath as she stepped closer to the mirror and began to pick the debris from her hair. "Grace would be furious if she could see you right now," Alicia said aloud to her reflection in a quiet voice. "She would call you a wastrel and a brute and say you are no good at all."

Then she burst into another round of giggles, rocking back and forth with glee. "But Grace isn't heeeere!" she sang.

As her hands ran over and over through the basin of cool water, Alicia's mind revisited her labours in the barn that morning. Laurence had been patient as ever with her and had demonstrated each task she was asked to do before setting her to it. And it had unquestionably been difficult work, even toil, as her sore muscles happily confirmed for her.

But all the same, it had been more fun than she had had in months, maybe years. Together they had fed and watered the horses and the

other animals, then engaged in a varied assortment of tasks that required great strength of arm—pitching hay, gathering eggs from the hens, collecting firewood, and so much more besides Alicia was unsure how they had completed it all before breakfast.

All of it was done in Laurence's charming company, accompanied by his gentle instruction and sharp wit. She had even been instructed on the proper way to milk the cows but had been so debilitated with laughter that she had given up before squeezing out the first drop.

I cannot thank Laurence enough for being so kind and patient as I muddled my way through those chores, Alicia thought, fixing her hair into a good-enough bun. He really is quite a wonderful man. Kind, generous, morally upright...handsome, certainly. I'm sure Mister Barton is right, any woman would be lucky to marry him. Not that any of the country lasses around here would be deserving of such a man.

She stopped, blinking. *Wherever did that thought come from?*

Shaking her head, she attempted to leave the thought behind at the bottom of the washbasin as she turned and walked out the door to breakfast.

Chapter 10

The Taste of Summer Apples

The life of a farmer was a busy one, Laurence knew. In the summer most of all, when there was always some chore that needed doing. Though he had enough skilled, seasoned hands to take care of it themselves, Laurence would rarely be seen sitting idle at this time of year.

Crops would need water, fences would need mending, the flocks would need minding or to be moved to a new patch of grass. It was a wonderful talent he had cultivated that he could always invent a chore to help keep his mind occupied or escape conversation with a boring acquaintance.

But try as he might to invent a chore for himself, on this particular afternoon Laurence found himself quite unable to think of anything productive to do with himself. In fact, there was really only one thing on his mind.

“I don’t suppose you’re busy this afternoon, Miss Ramsbury?” he asked as he poked his head around the corner into the upstairs library.

Laurence blinked in the bright sunlight flooding into the narrow, dusty room, and it took him a moment to realize Alicia was sitting in a different chair than where she had in their previous meeting there. When his eyes adjusted to the light and sighted her, he saw that she was virtually glowing in the room’s yellow radiance.

“As a matter of fact, I was.” She held up the spine of the book that was lying open in her lap.

“*Tom Jones!*” he said, feeling his eyebrows inch up his forehead. “Quite a scandalous read for a cultured young lady.”

“Oh yes, entirely. I was wondering just what it was doing on the bookshelf of an upstanding young man,” Alicia answered with an arch grin.

Giving an uncharacteristically uncomfortable laugh, Laurence rubbed the back of his head ruefully. “Yes, well,” he explained. “Apart from the literary achievements of Mister Fielding, which are quite remarkable...”

“Yes?” asked Alicia, smiling wickedly.

“It’s also one of the most positive, loving portrayals of country life I’ve encountered,” Laurence continued with greater confidence. “Tom’s country squire adoptive father may be a bit of a scallywag, but he and his children enjoy country life to its fullest. To be honest, I was entirely surprised by how much I enjoyed the story given its reputation, but now I find myself returning to it quite often. To, ah... certain parts of it, that is.”

Laurence only noticed Alicia’s look of impressed surprise when he finished his oration, at which point she adopted a more casual expression. “Actually, I had only just started reading. The last time Grace caught me with an ‘improper’ novel it was tossed into the fireplace. But I’m glad to know there’s so much to enjoy in it, and I look forward to...certain parts of it, at least!”

“Well,” said Laurence with an oddly melancholy sigh, “I shall leave you to it, then. I look forward to hearing your thoughts on—”

“Actually,” said Alicia brightly as she stood, book in hand. “I was thinking it was getting a bit stuffy in here. I was hoping you might come round with any other chores I could help with—well, not you, exactly, but someone, certainly.”

Laurence’s mouth curled in an eager smile, charmed by the blush that rose to Alicia’s rosy cheeks at her protestations. “In that case, we are both in luck, I should say.”

With one hand he held up the large, heavy basket he had carried upstairs with him. “What are your thoughts on...apples?”

* * *

“I confess, I had never heard of *summer* apples.”

Laurence tried so hard to keep the smile from his face, but Alicia did not make it easy as she took another eager bite of her apple. “I can’t imagine why not. There’s really no equal to them in flavour.” From the pleased-sounding noises coming from Alicia, he decided she must concur.

Pausing in thought as he plucked a fat, ripe yellow apple from a branch and dropped it in their basket, he amended his proclamation.

“Come to think of it, I wonder if they’re not just one of our well-kept secrets out here. If the city people knew about our summer apples, I don’t think we’d have any left for ourselves. That would be quite a shame—they’re really the best part of the season. And they grow so well in these parts that I don’t even mind bringing a few back for Mary-Anne.”

Alicia finished the last bite of her apple and tossed the core into the grass, then wiped her mouth on her sleeve and resumed her picking duties. The basket was nearly full, but the boughs were still full of the first harvest of the season.

“That’s something I have been so very impressed by since coming here,” she said thoughtfully.

“Summer apples? I might have guessed after we finished our second and third ones,” Laurence said with a chuckle.

“Not just that,” Alicia laughed good-naturedly. “Seasons.”

“Do you not have seasons in London, then?”

“Not the way you do here. Summer in London is a ghastly affair, most of the time. With the heat, everything grows quite sweaty, and all the dirt and dust clings to the body most horribly. To say nothing of the smell.”

Laurence made a disgusted face in sympathy for this plight.

“Here, though...” Alicia continued, a note of wonder coming to her voice. “There’s so much that seems so lovely about this season! I know that I don’t have much to compare it to other times of the year, but you and Mary-Anne are forever pointing out some special food or flower or smell that can only be enjoyed at this precise time in the calendar. Not that I need your expertise to notice, even—it’s like everything around us here is just so...bursting with life, and beauty, and...”

Alicia paused in her duties, looking around them admiringly. Laurence followed her gaze, his eye falling with great fondness on the wildflowers that peeked out at them from the grass. Suddenly he remembered how near they were to a particular vista and thought a rest might be in order.

“That should be enough apples for today, I think,” said Laurence, glancing at the overfull basket. “If we pick any more we shall have to carry them back in our bellies.”

“Perish the thought!” laughed Alicia.

“If you don’t mind a bit of idleness, there is a nice spot for a rest just over this hill.”

“I should like that. Nothing like a bit of rest to encourage good digestion.”

As they trudged up the hill, carrying the apple basket between them, the two fell into a conversational silence that was still flush with sound and music. Robins darted and sang from the boughs above them, and from the nearby rush of the creek, there was the steady

hum of frog song. From the smell of things, Laurence detected that they might be in for a spot of rain, but likely not until after dark.

“Oh, my! What a magnificent view!” breathed Alicia.

Laurence looked up and saw that they had reached their target atop the little ridge. Below them, they could see nearly ten miles of rolling hills and dales, populated by golden fields of wheat and green pastures. He knew the provenance of each flock and each row of produce, but from up here they looked like nothing more than tiny dots of black and white in the afternoon sun.

He often liked to take a rest here on days when he was not needed in the field—he found it was an ideal spot to read, or even better, to simply sit and think. In fact, he found he enjoyed the solitude here enough that he had never shared the location of this idyllic outlook with anyone before, not even Mary-Anne or James. Not until today, anyway.

Setting down his end of the basket on the ground, he cleared the leaves and twigs from a reasonably flat patch of grass and sighed with relief as he sat beneath the shade of an old elm tree. Laurence gestured for Alicia to sit on an old stump just nearby, but felt himself charged with anticipation when instead she sat close beside him. He nearly raised his voice in warning about getting grass stains on her pretty dress, but thought it best not to correct his companion, especially not after she had already collected more than her share of dirt during their apple-picking.

Alicia doesn't need any lectures from you on how to take care of her things, he reminded himself, scarcely realizing that he had ceased thinking of her as “Miss Ramsbury.”

For a long moment, they sat and watched the scene play out before them. The little puffs of clouds rolled by at their steady, unhurried pace, casting their shadows over the fields and hills of the valley below. The breeze blew the green shadow over their faces, carrying the sweet smell of apples to their noses. Laurence drank deep from the air, feeling a rush of satisfaction as the scent of the earth filled his lungs.

Alicia broke the silence with a pregnant clearing of the throat. "I...feel I must apologize once again. For having been so cold to you when I first arrived, Mister Gillingham."

Laurence dismissed this gesture with a wave of his hand. "In the library? Completely forgotten, please don't trouble yourself with worry about it."

"Not only that conversation, though. Even when you first approached us on the road, I fear I behaved most rudely towards you. It feels so silly, looking back on my actions now." Laurence frowned, detecting how heavy her voice sounded with regret.

"You had just been through an incredibly nerve-racking experience if you have forgotten," he answered with sympathy. "Besides, you had no way to know who I was or whether I spoke the truth when I offered to help."

Alicia gave a reluctant nod, then snorted as some memory returned to her. "Do you know, I first suspected you might be a highwayman?"

"Hah! If I were one, I would surely be one of the least gentlemanly gentleman robbers you could meet. I am fairly sure I am nowhere near

as dashing as a Dick Turpin or his ilk. But then again, James is always telling me I need to do more than just farm. Perhaps it's time to consider a change in career?" He rubbed his chin and made a face that might approximate a dashing air—from Alicia's reaction, he guessed he may have missed the mark, and the two shared a hearty laugh atop their grassy seat.

Once again they lapsed into quiet contemplation of the country view. Laurence too never failed to feel rejuvenated by the sights and smells of the nature that surrounded him, especially at this time of year...but now, he found his thoughts wandering to closer matters. He chewed on his lower lip, suddenly acutely aware of how near Alicia's body was to him, how he could hear her sniff the fragrant country air.

"I must admit, I cannot believe just how peaceful it all feels out here. Not a week ago I was convinced the countryside was full of nothing but mud and wild beasts." Alicia breathed in a satisfied breath through her nose. "Yet I cannot remember the last time I have had the chance to just...sit like this. To sit and take in the sights without being observed myself."

"Have..." Laurence answered, trying to focus his mind on something besides the strange floral smell that he had begun to suspect was coming from Alicia. "Have you never been out in the country before, then, Ali—Miss Ramsbury?"

Damn fool, watch your manners, Laurence cursed himself.

"No! Isn't that extraordinary?" she laughed. "Not here, certainly. I've passed through countryside like this dozens of times on my way to visit Missus Miggins or some far-off friend or relation, but I never took the time to actually *look* at it apart from out the carriage window. Yet now I begin to find it so completely enchanting I can scarcely believe it!"

Something about hearing the joy and tranquillity in her voice gave Laurence a strange shiver down his back. With a somewhat chilly laugh, he said, "Careful, now. If you go on liking it out here so much it will be hard to leave once Mister Place returns with the carriage."

He looked over and saw Alicia give a tiny sigh and pick a stalk of grass, which she proceeded to dissect offhandedly with her fingernails. "I...confess, the thought had occurred to me as well. I had thought I wanted nothing more than to return to normalcy in London. Now, though, the thought of going back to all my obligations, all the same teas and balls and visits...well, it's hard to see the appeal amid all the sunshine and apples and wildflowers out here."

Among Laurence's various positive attributes was his certainty that he knew when to speak a helpful word and when to keep his mouth shut and listen. His instincts urged him to do the latter in this case, so he folded his hands in his lap and continued staring off over the hills as Alicia continued.

"It's just..." She stopped again, emitting a much more beleaguered sigh. "I don't know how anyone brings these things up. I feel as though I am boasting when in fact I want nothing to do with it. Not with any of it."

Alicia looked over to him, her eyelashes fluttering thanks to either the wind or tears she was fighting. With a subtle smile and an incline of his head, he said to her without speaking, *Just go ahead and say it. It's all right.* At least, that's what he hoped to communicate.

His judgment must not have completely incorrect, as with a breath Alicia finally said, "I inherited a great deal of money from my parents.

Both of us did, Grace and I. I don't even know how much, really, nor just what one would do with such money."

Neither do I, thought Laurence with a gulp. I daresay I cannot even guess how much money a London gentlewoman considers "a great deal."

"Grace says it's not for us, not really. It's meant as our dowries." Alicia gave a barking, dismissive laugh. "As though we are prize hens to be bartered over or won. We must marry right, Grace always tells me—though every time any gentleman makes overtures of marriage in my direction, she is quick to shoot him down and banish him from our social circle. We must marry right, so long as she marries before I do."

Alicia suddenly looked up at Laurence sharply. "Not that any of the men who have approached me have seemed anything other than perfectly dreadful. I...have been tempted to accept an engagement or two, but even as I entertained this notion I knew it was more to seek an end to this terrible limbo of neither

From somewhere overhead came the cry of a lonely eagle. With another sigh, Alicia craned her head back to look up into the sky through the canopy of green leaves. "You know, today is the first time I can remember when I actually stopped to think about what it is I want. I have always had my schedule dictated to me, by Grace or my parents or suitors or...I don't know, what London society expects of me. Everything I have done has been to appease others' expectations. And the sensation of determining my own actions according to my preferences was a strangely frightening one."

Laurence felt Alicia's muscles tense as she sat beside him. He was tempted to reach out and put a comforting arm around her, but his good sense prevailed, and instead, he joined her in her idle activity of picking apart fallen leaves.

"I still don't know just what it is I want, but I do feel I've come closer, at least." A gust of wind blew through the trees, and Alicia paused before continuing. "I think of what I remember of my parents' life before Mother got sick. They never cared much about social standing the way Grace does—they always seemed so very happy to do little more than travel and enjoy one another's company. And now I begin to ask myself if that is so very much to ask for myself as well."

Her voice dropping to nearly a whisper, Laurence craned his neck to hear her soft, pitiable words. "I am just...so very tired. Tired of Grace. Tired of constant social wheeling and dealing. Tired of being on display, of being pursued for all the wrong reasons. Come to think, I'm tired of absolutely everything normal about my life, and I was so focused on the day-to-day that I never even realized how tired I was!"

As Alicia's words finally came to a close, they were replaced with an insistent sniffing sound. Laurence looked in her direction with concern to see that she was crying.

Oh, no, Laurence thought, feeling his heart swell with pity. His head swam, his muscles surging with energy. He did not know what it was he felt like doing, but whatever it was, he wanted to make these feelings of hurt that were plaguing Alicia stop more than anything he had wanted in his life. Whatever the thing was that had wrapped around his leg, he felt it tug insistently now.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry," Alicia said, wiping away tears angrily. "I know all this must sound so terribly pathetic to you. Here you are, earning your living from the sweat of your brow, pulling life from the earth with your own hands...and here is a poor rich girl from the city, complaining about not knowing what to do with all her money."

“No!” Laurence said. Alicia looked up at him, blinking—she seemed as startled by the fervour in his voice as he was himself. “No, Alicia, that’s...that’s not it at all,” he said in a gentler tone.

There was so much more he wanted to say. He wanted to tell her how she was clearly a wonderful, special woman, one who should never have to relinquish her own wishes for the sake of her sister or anyone else. He wanted to tell her how much he hated to hear how distraught she was. He wanted to offer her his sympathy—more than that, to give her solutions to her problems so she need never be troubled again.

But the longer his eyes swam through Alicia’s grass-green irises, the fewer words he felt he had within him. He no more realized that he was drawing closer to her as she drew closer to him than he realized he had just called her by her first name.

Their eyes closed, their words forgotten as their lips touched in a brilliant explosion of light and warmth and fresh summer apples.

Chapter 11

Golden Days

Alicia had been kissed before. She had even kissed a fair handful of boys and young men in her time, when she found them relatively comely or she had wanted to exact some petty revenge on Grace.

But not like this. In fact, as she felt Laurence's strong, masculine hand reach up and brush against her cheek, their lips still locked in a tender embrace, she was dimly aware she had never experienced anything like this in her life. Not even in her most private, sensuous dreams, the ones that woke her with quivering legs and a sweat-dappled brow. It felt queerly as though she had left her mind, had become a creature composed of nothing but pure, electric corporeality.

Alicia was unsure if she was the one who broke away from the kiss or if it was Laurence. She was disappointed either way, and the gnawing heat that was burning inside her grew more insistent as his firm, rugged lips pulled away from hers.

Strange, Alicia mused, tracing a finger along the place on her lips where he had kissed her. *I cannot guess what is going through his mind now, but with this confused, unguarded expression he looks more handsome than ever.* This too was quite unlike her previous forays into kissing.

Then a pained expression came over Laurence's face. He licked his lips expectantly, pulling his body away from hers on the grass. As he opened his mouth to speak, though, Alicia cut in first.

“If you are about to apologize, Mister Gillingham—Laurence,” she corrected herself, giving a slight titter at the thrill of impropriety. “Please don’t. Not for anything.”

Laurence closed his mouth again, his mouth breaking open in a broad, relieved smile. “In fact, I...think I should like to do that again, Laurence,” Alicia found herself saying softly, her hand resting atop his.

He looked up at her, and Alicia thought she could see a flicker of the same hunger within his beautiful blue eyes. “I feel the same way.”

Neither of them moved for a long time, though. Alicia felt his heartbeat through the skin of his hand, felt it beat faster as they continued to gaze into one another’s eyes—or was that her own heart she was sensing?

The shadow that fell over their faces broke the spell at long last. Alicia looked about, blinking, and saw that the sun had turned burnished orange and was close to disappearing over the horizon. The dots that speckled the fields below were retreating back to the distant farmhouses, now painted in dark gold streaks as the day was ending.

“We should—”

“It would be best—”

They stopped and laughed as their hands held onto one another even

tighter than before. Alicia felt Laurence's smile grow so wide that it spread onto her own face, and without a word, they scrambled to their feet, picked up the apple basket between them, and started walking briskly back to the Gillingham house.

Though the walk was a wordless one, Alicia heard her own words and Laurence's answers ring over and over in her mind. The worries that usually filled her head about Grace and everything else had fallen completely silent, drowned out by the giddy repetition of those glorious words:

I should like to do that again. I feel the same way.

* * *

The rest of the day was a blur, as was the following morning. Whenever she noticed the hour Alicia felt as though she had just woken from a faint, so shocked was she that time had continued to pass.

Yet at the same time, her mind was full of memories of such crystal clarity that she found herself on the precipice of weeping at the beauty that now existed within her mind.

Laurence's shining golden face, smiling as I carried on about something or other over supper. He looked at me with such undisguised admiration that I have never seen from anyone before.

Laurence running ahead of me with boyish energy. One of us proposed a race across the field on the way to water the crops—I think it must have

been me, silly girl. I really thought I might beat him, despite his athletic physique and powerful legs. Sometimes I forget just how perfectly well-formed he is until I see those muscles move and flex with such strength. When he tripped in the mud I thought I might never stop laughing.

Laurence, looking down on me as I lay beside him in the grass beside the pasture. The sight of his flaxen hair moving softly in the wind, his warm smile and his strong fingers holding my hand, full of some drive or desire that neither of us dared speak of.

Every chance she got she found herself inventing some reason to accompany him on a chore or found him peeking out at her from around a corner, his voice raised in a continuation of whatever their prior conversation had been. It was as though his company was water and she had been dying of thirst—Alicia felt she could simply not get enough of Laurence's presence. And from his giddy expression whenever his gaze fell upon her, she suspected he really might feel the same way.

In the late afternoon—twenty-four hours and the blink of an eye after their fateful kiss—Laurence invited her to see a nearby waterfall. Alicia could not agree quickly enough and scarcely waited until they were out the front door before her hand reached out and wrapped itself in his.

The “waterfall,” as he called it, was a relatively modest affair. Not that Alicia had ever seen any more impressive waterfalls firsthand, of course, but compared to what she had seen illustrated in some of her books it seemed a bit...petite. Really it was little more than a slight dip between two hills, through which a creek dropped a few feet down some smooth rocks.

Still, she gave her best imitation of being impressed by the sight, which seemed to satisfy Laurence. Better prepared than the day

before, he spread a blanket on the grassy bank of the river and invited her to sit as they shared in the light meal he had packed—more summer apples, she was happy to see. Together they sucked the juices from the delicious yellow fruits and tossed the seeds into the fertile earth. *I wonder if more trees will grow here, planted by our little visit?* Alicia wondered idly.

Sooner or later, as they both must have known would happen, Alicia found her hands reaching up to caress his bull-like neck. Laurence gave a pleased little grunt, and then once again their lips met in a fervent embrace.

Just as before, Alicia felt some measure of fear at just how hot the fire within her burned. A voice within her cried to pull away from Laurence—not because she did not want to continue, but because she was afraid she would not be able to stop herself. Yet they continued to kiss there beside the cascading waters, and with each inch, she relented to her desires Alicia felt a rush of passion that was utterly intoxicating.

For as cool and collected a man as Laurence usually was, he seemed to be endearingly innocent in the ways of love and approached her body with a curiosity that Alicia found quite sweet. His body was a foreign land to her as well—so unlike her fragile frame, or the bodies of her frail, coughing suitors like Mister Woodruff—and her senses were eager to explore its terrain.

Together they indulged their curious natures, their breath and fingers uncovering hidden sites of pleasure nestled in the other's strange geography. She breathed in sharply as his lips brushed her neck, and he did the same when her fingers roamed the tangled forest of curly yellow hairs on his chest. When they kissed, Alicia felt their breaths mingle in the hot, steamy summer air, and his lips were as sweet and firm in her mouth as summer apples.

In perfect sync with the hot, lazy summer day, their gentle kissing and caressing was slow, unhurried, as placid and untroubled as the blue, blue sky above. From time to time Alicia caught her hand or his wandering to dark, forbidden loci beneath their clothes, but they stopped themselves with bated breath, demolishing the tension they built with conversation or raucous bouts of tickling.

Eventually, they pulled into a close embrace, lying together beside the thundering waters. Alicia cooed as she rubbed her head against Laurence's broad chest and muscular arms that wrapped around her.

"We should probably go back," one of them said every so often. The other would agree, but instead of leaving they would stay there in that same restful posture, their bodies warm and close.

"You know," Alicia said at one point as Laurence nuzzled against her hair. "I think I really do envy you, Laurence."

"Oho, you must know something about me that I don't," he replied, chuckling in a way that reverberated through her and nearly knocked the words out of her mind.

"I do, though. You never seem to have any doubt about what it is you need to do. Where I am always fretting about how my choices will please others, about which suitor is more appropriate or which dress will impress my peers, you seem so very certain of yourself. Each day you wake, you do your chores, you care for the land and your animals, and you go to bed knowing what you did with your time was good and right."

She felt him shift slightly behind her. He paused in thought for a time

before answering, “When you put it that way, it sounds a bit monotonous, I must say.”

Alicia pushed herself up on her arm, turning to look at Laurence with dismay. “Oh, no, I didn’t mean—”

He stopped her protests with a delicate little kiss on the tip of her nose. “I know you didn’t, Alicia. But it brings to mind something I have been thinking of myself.”

Laurence’s face twisted in a faraway look of melancholy that felt utterly heartbreaking to look at. Alicia sucked in a breath as she watched him chew over whatever it was that was bothering him.

“What is it?” she asked, unable to bear the wait.

“You know,” he said with a sigh, “I had often worried that very thing—people have always told me that travel is broadening, that seeing new places and things is good for a man...or a woman, certainly.” They shared a smile. “I never had any interest in leaving this farm, though.

“I hope you know that I don’t think any less of you for that,” Alicia protested. “Especially having seen just what a wonderful place it is.”

“You don’t know how happy it makes me to hear you say that,” said Laurence with a fond smile. For a moment Alicia thought he was going to kiss her again, but then he continued in a heavy voice, “All the same, I was almost afraid to be broadened, somehow. I think some part of me has always worried that by being exposed to something

new I would begin to doubt my own happiness here.”

“Well,” said Alicia, snuggling closer to him on the blanket and resting her head on his massive shoulder. “Who says you have to? People can believe whatever they like—surely you can just stay here and be as happy as you like.”

His body suddenly felt hard and stiff beneath her, as though she were lying on a rock. “I...am no longer sure that is the case,” he murmured.

Oh no, she thought, hearing the pain in Laurence’s deep, resonant voice. *What have I brought on this magnificent man by my carelessness?* She felt her fingers clench anxiously.

“Even without setting a foot off my farm,” he continued in a faraway voice, “suddenly I find myself confronted with a world I had never known existed. One full of possibilities, just as everyone said.”

Laurence took a ragged breath, and Alicia closed her eyes to shut away her tears of sympathy. “You know, we are remarkably alike in many ways, Alicia. Most of all, it seems neither of us has ever taken the time to think about what it is we want. And now, being confronted with something I want—something I had never dared imagine before in my life—I find myself almost petrified with fear that I may be denied it.”

What does he mean? Alicia cried to herself, her eyes still firmly shut. *What is he talking about? Have I somehow brought uncertainty into his life and robbed him of his contentedness? Or is there something else that—*

Her worries were interrupted as she felt herself lifted and turned by strong arms. Her eyes shot open to see Laurence lower his head to hers and kiss her deeply on the lips.

With a gentle moan, Alicia's fingers tensed, then relaxed as they folded behind his head, enjoying the sensation of running through his thick golden hair. She pulled him closer to her, her mouth parting to allow the welcome intrusion of Laurence's tongue. From every corner of her mouth, she drank him in greedily, squirming with pleasure in his rock-solid grasp.

So long as they were kissing, so long as his skin met hers, everything else in the world was shut away. There was only Laurence and Alicia, their two souls flowing into one through the blessed conduits of their bodies.

Even after they broke their kiss, Alicia felt her head spinning pleasantly. They looked into one another's eyes, sharing a smile for a long while before at last rising to their feet and dusting themselves off.

"But...what about what you were saying? Are you—" Alicia asked, her tears of happiness threatening to take on a more sour tinge.

Laurence reached up a finger and brushed away one of her tears. "Never you mind, Alicia. If you would be so kind to forget I said anything, I would be much obliged to you."

She laughed. "*I would do absolutely anything you asked me to,*" was what she wanted to say to him. Instead, she just nodded and took him by the arm as they set off down the path.

Though they had talked long and deeply of their worries, Alicia found herself humming a happy tune as they turned back toward Laurence's house. And as he reached a hand around to pull her close to him by the waist, she felt her carefree bliss catch on him. As they wound through the hills on the gold-haloed dusty path, their voices mingled together in cheery, wordless song.

It was such a shame it all had to end up so quickly spoiled.

Chapter 12

Beyond Belief

Though she could not detect just what it was, something seemed wrong to Alicia as they sighted the Gillingham house at the end of the road. She had been so filled with happiness on the walk back from the waterfall, giggling as she and Laurence removed their hands from one another just as they were passed by a gaggle of his field hands walking home at the end of the workday. But now, seeing Mary-Anne sitting in a wooden chair in the garden by the front door, Alicia felt a seed of trepidation lodge in her stomach.

“Another hard day of toil on the farm, brother? I hope he’s not working you too hard, Miss Ramsbury,” said Mary-Anne with a coy smile, rising from her chair.

“No, I—” Alicia protested, feeling a cold hand of panic grip her throat. *Does she know that we...?*

“Not all of us are so fatigued from our long day of labour and hardship that we need a rest in the afternoon,” Laurence said cheekily.

Ignoring this slight, Mary-Anne held out a sealed envelope to Alicia.

“For me? What is it?” asked Alicia, utterly at a loss.

Mary-Anne's expression was equally confused. "A reply from your sister, it looks like. To your letter you wrote to her?"

No! Alicia thought as she looked at the creased white paper blankly, her heart falling to her feet. From the sinking feeling in her stomach, it felt as though the cloud that she had been floating atop all day had suddenly burst, sending her plummeting back to earth.

"The messenger must have been paid extra to get it back here in such a hurry," said Mary-Anne brusquely. "It came not long after noon. I suppose Miss Ramsbury's sister could have saved her money and gotten it here a little later, with the two of you busy sneaking off to wherever it is you've been going all day."

Laurence did not appear to notice this jab in his direction—when Alicia looked up she saw he was staring at her, his face lined with concern.

"Thank you. Thank you, Mary-Anne," Alicia said through the fog of concern that had settled over her.

"Aren't you going to read it?"

Alicia saw that she had set the letter back on the table in the entryway and was wiping her fingers on her dress as though to remove a stain from them. "Oh, er...yes," she said distantly. "Not at the moment, though. After supper would be best, I think."

Mary-Anne gave Laurence a meaningful look, prompting him to shrug and chime in, "Whatever's in the letter, not much she can do about it

right this moment.”

Alicia began to trudge up the stairs to clean up before supper. “Besides, I find I can handle your abuse better on a full stomach,” she heard Laurence’s voice floating up behind her. “Perhaps Alicia is the same way.”

If Mary-Anne had an answer to this jibe, Alicia did not hear it. Though sound carried easily up the stairs and through the winding wooden corridors of the old house, she was too lost in worry to notice anything around her.

Grace has written. Herbert will surely be returning soon. I will be returning to my normal life before long.

She paused with her hand on the doorknob to her room. Wasn’t that what she wanted? To go back home, to her own bed? To resume her own normal life?

No... she thought, images of her conversation with Laurence echoing up from her memory. That was what I thought should happen. But it’s not what I want, I don’t think. Not anymore. And now it’s going to happen whether I like it or not.

Alicia pushed right past her mirror and washbasin and collapsed onto her bed in a flood of tears.

* * *

As ever in the Gillingham household, supper was a simple but thoroughly well-made affair. Yet Alicia found herself unable to enjoy the roast chicken and turnips; delicious as it was, it turned to ash in her mouth when she remembered the letter lying in wait for her like a deadly viper in the grass.

Grace is furious, she thought, imagining the angry black scribbles that awaited her in the other room. She blames me for the carriage accident. She claims I have ruined her life. She means to lock me in my bedroom until she finds a man who will marry her in exchange for our entire inheritance.

“I must say, all the country air is agreeing with you very well, Miss Alicia!”

Alicia looked up from her still-full plate, blinking. “What?” she asked Jenny in a snappish voice. Unruffled, Jenny repeated her statement just as brightly as before.

“Yes,” mused Mary-Anne. “I must say, Miss Ramsbury, the extraordinary nature of your arrival here notwithstanding, you are looking more lively and full of health than ever. Don’t you think so, Laurence?”

When this question went unanswered, Alicia looked over and noticed for the first time that Laurence was staring off into space, consumed in his own thoughts. Mary-Anne nudged him under the table with her foot—or kicked him, perhaps, judging by the look of alarm on his face.

“I say, don’t you think Miss Ramsbury has been looking quite well

these days, Laurence?" Mary-Anne repeated with a significant smile.

"Sorry, ah, what?" Laurence blustered, turning his eyes back down to his plate. "Well? Yes, well...I'm sure I don't know." Alicia began to pick at a fingernail as she saw a blush spread across his cheeks.

"Oh, come now, it's as plain as the nose on my face. Or the nose on *your* face, to pick something a bit more obvious." Mary-Anne gestured broadly to Alicia, who was suddenly filled with the desire to flee the table. "Miss Ramsbury is virtually glowing. Her skin is not half so ghostly pale as when she arrived just a few days ago. No offence meant, of course."

"Of course," Alicia said quietly, covering her face discreetly with her napkin.

"You don't mean to say you haven't paid any attention at all to the condition of our guest?" said Mary-Anne to her brother in a wicked tone, tossing a wink and a smile in Alicia's direction.

Laurence grunted noncommittally. He helped himself to another serving of turnips though his plate was still mostly full.

"Has there been any news of Mister Place, Miss Alicia?" Jenny piped in as she popped another morsel of chicken into her mouth, evidently unaware of the tension she was cutting. "Did Miss Grace have anything to say in the letter about getting us home?"

Alicia winced. "Oh...no, I'm sorry, Jenny, I don't know. I'm afraid I haven't read it yet."

A little later, she said to herself. I will read it after supper. Let this day be finished so Grace does not take it from me. Let her ruin the night instead.

* * *

Inevitably, later came. Supper was concluded, and the occupants of the Gillingham household retired to their separate corners: Mary-Anne to her book in the parlour, Jenny to her knitting in her chair, Laurence to his library. Despite her desire to put off reading the letter, Alicia felt too consumed with worry about her activities with Laurence being discovered to seek out any companionship, so instead, she sat in her room to spend the evening fretting.

This is ridiculous, she would say to herself, frustrated at her inaction. The letter will be the same if you read it now or in an hour. Why not simply get it over with? Surely it can't be all that bad—it's not as though Grace can hurt you with one little letter.

That the question had a simple answer did not stop Alicia from asking herself again and again. She knew that once the letter was opened and read, her normal life would resume in some form or another. She could no longer go on thinking only of her wants in the moment, of how good it felt to enjoy the sights and sensations of nature with Laurence. As soon as she opened the envelope, all that would be intruded upon by Grace's furious criticism, by endless proposals from feckless social climbers, by the filthy air and stifling salons of London. And for all the people who surrounded her, she would once more be terribly, desperately lonely.

Her candle was half-burned when it occurred to Alicia to seek something for her nerves. Mary-Anne had mentioned a decanter of

apple brandy that was kept in the downstairs parlour for just such an occasion. "I'd finished near half a bottle myself by the time my poor Edward decided to cut short his visit to the countryside," she'd said with a laugh.

Nothing wrong with a sip of Dutch courage, she said to herself, already rising from where she had collapsed upon the bed. *A small glass, and then I shall open the letter.*

Evidently, it was later than she realized, judging by how thoroughly Jenny had fallen asleep in her chair in the room adjoining Alicia's. She smiled as she looked at her faithful companion. *We'll get you home soon, Jenny, don't you worry*, she thought, patting the middle-aged woman on the shoulder gently as she walked by. As expected, Jenny's snoring was briefly interrupted, but she remained fast asleep as Alicia continued to tiptoe towards the staircase.

"—think it's cruel?"

"Cruel? What are you talking about?"

Alicia froze in place at the top of the stairs. Voices, coming from downstairs. Not raised, but speaking in a tone that suggested they were engaged in a hushed argument.

"Really? You may not be unintelligent, brother, but sometimes you are the stupidest man I have ever known."

"I don't have any idea what you mean."

That's Mary-Anne and Laurence, she deduced from the higher pitch of the first voice and the low baritone of the second. *But what on earth could they be talking about with such vehemence?* She did not move a muscle, fearful a single twitch would cause a floorboard to creak.

"You know this cannot go on. Before you know it the man will be back and this whole episode will be over for good."

"Do you really think I don't know that?"

"And do you expect her to come back for a visit with all her money and her fancy retinue? Will you write to her? Travel to see her? My god, Laurence, you really are dreaming if you think there's any future for you."

"You're wrong, Mary-Anne. That's not what I'm thinking at all.

"Then what *are* you thinking? More importantly, what are you doing?"

A brief silence was filled with a soft, regular thumping sound, as if someone were beginning to pace back and forth. "It's...nothing. Nothing at all."

"So just what do you think is going to happen if you go on doing 'nothing' as you have been? Look beyond yourself for once and think about how she will feel when all this turns out to be nothing. I tell you, it's downright cruel, Laurence, and I won't stand for it."

“Then don’t. You don’t have to stand for a thing.”

The sound of angry footsteps stomping towards the staircase sent Alicia flying back to her room, closing the door hurriedly behind her. Her heart was racing, breath coming fast as she rested her back against the closed door.

What in heaven’s name were they talking about? she thought in bewilderment. *“The man will be back.” Are they referring to Herbert? Then what did she mean about treating someone cruelly? Were they talking about me?*

Alicia sank down to the floor, covering her face with her hands. *If no one has ever told me that it’s a bad idea to eavesdrop, then certainly someone should have done so.* Whatever it was that was under discussion, she could certainly not do anything to uncover more of the conversation without outing herself as a base sneak. Once again she felt overcome by a crushing sense of hopelessness.

After a few calming breaths she opened her eyes and spied the sealed envelope lying on a wooden chair.

In the end, she realized with a feeling of surrender, *it seems I can truly put off the task no longer. There is nothing I can do but to open the letter and see what Grace has to say.*

“Perhaps it’s good news,” Alicia said to herself, hoping to reclaim some of the optimism she had earned through her idyllic day with Laurence. “Perhaps she has been worried about my health and is

relieved I am unhurt. Perhaps she has hired search parties and now will be sending me help.”

She sighed, tearing open the envelope with her finger. “Then again, perhaps not.” Fingers clenched, she withdrew the thin sheet of paper, unfolded it and began reading.

“To My Would-Be Imperilled Sister—”

“Not the most promising start,” Alicia muttered under her breath.

Our lives have been filled with all manner of upsets and surprises, and we have faced many terrible things together. But this latest escapade of yours really is beyond belief.

I don't know where you got this foolish plan in your head, nor how you managed to sabotage our carriage and separate yourself from Herbert. To be honest, I have no desire to know. Whatever you are plotting and however you have managed to do it, all that matters is that you have managed to ruin not only our precious family carriage, but your own sister's security and reputation.

“Oh, Grace...” Alicia muttered. Her sister had always been prone to paranoid thoughts. It had taken Alicia a great deal of time to begin to understand that the world was not the bloody, cutthroat game Grace seemed to think it was, harsh though London society could be from time to time. In fact, as long as she could remember Grace had bemoaned her poor luck, taking anyone else's success as a grave affront to her. It seemed this characteristic had not changed in Alicia's absence.

She read on, fingers clenching the corners of the paper.

From the moment I received your poisonous little letter, I was sent into a frenzy. I could not imagine how you could be so very selfish, knowing how I was relying on you to return home in a timely fashion after visiting Missus Miggins. Then that blackguard Mister Woodruff sent a card inquiring after you, and all your scheming finally fell apart. Did you really think I had forgotten our little fight before you left?

“Fight? And is she talking about *Elliot* Woodruff?” Alicia wondered aloud.

Then the recollections came rising up out of the fog of her memory. She had had a row with Grace, indeed, the very day before she had left for Portsmouth. Now all the ugly details reared their heads: how Alicia had raised her voice and screamed at her sister to stop controlling her life.

How Grace had called her an ungrateful brat, telling her that Mister Woodruff was both unacceptably below their station and better than anyone Alicia would ever manage to trick into marriage. How Grace had accused her of secretly trying to marry Mister Woodruff without her consent.

Well, you should know that in repayment for your bizarre little stunt, I have put an end to your designs on Mister Woodruff. I sent him a letter that told him in no uncertain terms that you are not interested in marrying him in the least. So whatever it is you were planning on achieving by wrecking your carriage, rest assured that now that is thoroughly spoiled.

“Preposterous,” said Alicia. *Even if Mister Woodruff had held the slightest appeal for me—which he absolutely did not—the thought that I would somehow manufacture a carriage accident to effect an elopement or...or whatever it is she’s accusing me of? It’s completely ridiculous!*

There were only a few lines remaining in the letter, but Alicia suspected the largest dose of venom was saved for the end.

I will make my intentions very clear to you, sister: return to London posthaste. Once you have paid from your allowance to have the carriage repaired, I shall consider accepting your apology for this farce. If you are not back within the week, I shall expect you never to return at all.

“What rot,” Alicia muttered. “As though I were personally keeping Herbert from returning with the carriage.”

And if you ever, ever attempt to go behind my back with a gentleman again? Or even entertain the notion of marrying before your older sister, damn the scandal that will result! You can be sure I will not be so generous next time.

—*Your Suffering Sister, Grace Ramsbury.*

Alicia drew in a heavy breath, her arms collapsing to her sides as she allowed the letter to float helplessly to the floor. Suddenly she felt fifty years older.

I was wrong, she thought with a pang of sorrow in her gut. *One little*

letter from Grace is more than enough to hurt me.

As she lay in her bed, staring up at the rafters above her, Alicia's mind retrieved memories of her golden afternoon with Laurence. But the joy she had experienced now felt curdled by Grace's words.

What would Laurence think if he heard Grace's words? she thought, desperately seeking some comfort from this verbal assault. A soft smile returned to her lips, thinking of how Laurence had held her by the riverside, of how soothing she found his presence, how warm and wanted he made her feel. Surely he would make her feel better if she told him just how disturbing Grace's letter was.

Then her heart wrenched in her chest as she pondered this interaction a bit more. *If I told her I wanted to be with Laurence, Grace would never in a thousand years acquiesce to it.*

Alicia shivered, realizing how sure she was of this conclusion. The corollaries of this thought were still unclear—*Would I want to be with Laurence for good and always, even? Would I be happy if I married him? What would my life be like if I stayed here in the countryside?*—but Grace's refusal was a sure thing. Even putting aside the scandal of Alicia marrying before her older sister, a common farmer, no matter how well-read or cultured, was so far outside the realm of acceptability that it hardly bore contemplating.

She blinked, her eyes forced open as though by glue.

What am I going to do?

Chapter 13

In the Amber Sunlight

Thwarting every bit of earned wisdom and experience about the predictability of English weather, the next day was another beautiful one. The sunshine was warm, the breeze lively and deliciously cool. The fields were awash with birdsong and bumblebees carrying out their merry work among the wildflowers, and the hands hummed and chatted pleasantly during the morning watering.

To Laurence, though, it was all as grim and terrible as a graveyard.

What in the world could be wrong with Alicia?

The night before had been a long one, with Mary-Anne's words of admonishment ringing in his ears again and again. Worse, the hope that had carried him through the long night—that come the morning he would once again get to bask in the company of the lovely Alicia, come what may—transformed into a mocking sense of longing that turned him into a nervous wreck. At each stage of his morning chores, Laurence had looked up eagerly at every sound that reached his ears, thinking it was Alicia come to help, or at least to pass the time with him. Each time he was disappointed.

If his hope had grown thin over the morning, it deteriorated into nothing when he reached the breakfast table. Mary-Anne and Jenny were their normal chipper selves, but Alicia had regressed into the cold, distant woman he had first met five days earlier. Every comment or joke went unanswered, and when Laurence had even suggested another walk around the farm the afternoon—ignoring the pointed

look Mary-Anne gave him as he did so—Alicia did not even look at him when she gave her noncommittal refusal.

Did I do something wrong?

Was there something in the letter that upset her?

Does she regret having...dallied with me as we have done?

Should I go to her and see what's wrong? Or does she wish me to leave her alone? Could I even do that, now?

Laurence was so beset by these questions that he grew clumsy and slow at his work. He nearly took off a finger with his shears while helping in the fields, and had to quit in frustration when he found he had forgotten how to tie a simple knot. Even steadfast Dennis had been impatient with how distracted he had been, suggesting Laurence take a rest so the other workers could finish their task without him.

I should go see Alicia, Laurence told himself half a dozen times and lay down his tools to run off to speak with her. And half a dozen times he gave up this endeavour before making it ten paces back to the house—if Mary-Anne saw him, she would surely try to talk him out of speaking with Alicia. And worse, even if she didn't, there was a chance Alicia might tell him she no longer wanted to see him.

Have I been acting a fool all this time? he thought, putting his head in his hands and fighting a tide of despair that rose up within him. *Of course you have been, you dolt*, returned a voice inside him. *What could you possibly have to offer a beautiful, urbane London woman besides a*

sympathetic ear and an opportunity to practice flirting for when she found a man she would really want in her life?

Still, though his certainty in the bleakness of his situation was formidable, Laurence still felt the tug of whatever it was that had clamped itself to him. And when the hour came for Mary-Anne's and Jenny's usual afternoon rest, he virtually ran up to his library.

Just find out what's wrong, he said to himself as he took the stairs, his heart hammering in his ears. Whatever has happened to Alicia, she deserves your patience, even if that means losing this wonderful thing you have been blessed with.

As Laurence rounded the corner into the library, his heart leapt upon seeing Alicia sitting in one of the chairs facing the window. Then it plummeted back to the earth when he saw the look of distress on her face as she turned to look at him.

"Oh. Good afternoon, Mister Gillingham," she said in a dour voice, turning her gaze back out the window.

Trying not to wince, Laurence walked into the room and sat in a nearby chair. "I...just wanted to see if you needed anything," he said hesitantly.

"No, thank you," she answered.

His instinct at this chilly reception was to run and leave her to her misery. But with his usual pig-headed lack of good sense, Laurence could not resist persisting. With a forced smile, he continued, "Well,

then, in that case perhaps I could impose on more of your talents to help around the farm for a spell? Rhea and Victoria could use a bit of exercise, and even if I have a few hands who are a little better equipped for dealing with the horses, I don't have any who are half so pretty as you."

"Perhaps another time."

Laurence took a slow, shuddering breath, trying to keep his mood as light as possible.

"It's a shame," he murmured, waiting for Alicia to look up at him to finish his sentence. After a few breaths, he leaned forward and gave her his most innocently friendly smile. "Even those who have tried our summer apples here in Dunwood don't know that the real delicacy is our local *escargot*. I don't suppose you've had the pleasure of trying fresh country snails, have you?"

Now Alicia gave no response at all save a quiet breath as she continued to stare out the window at the afternoon sun.

You utter fool, Laurence thought, his heart sinking in his chest. *Why do you have to always be so damnably flippant?*

He peered at Alicia's face carefully, though she continued to avoid looking at his eyes. She was even more beautiful than usual, sitting with her ankles crossed in a flowing yellow dress, her brown curls cascading over her shoulders enticingly. He could see from the tension in her hands and the lines on her forehead that she was holding something back.

At last, he could bear it no longer and reached out a hand to place it atop hers. Alicia looked up, startled, as he looked into her eyes and said, "Alicia. Whatever it is that's bothering you, I would desperately love to know what is wrong. I cannot promise I can fix the problem, but I promise I will do anything I can to help, even if that means leaving this room right now."

Alicia's stony visage flickered with anger for a moment, and Laurence feared he had gone too far. But then she exploded into tears, rising from her chair and covering her eyes as she stalked off into the far corner of the library.

"Oh, why do you always have to be so damnably *wonderful*?" she choked out between sobs.

Laurence stopped, realizing he had leapt from his chair and rushed to her side, arms outstretched to envelop her in a comforting embrace. Unsure of the wisdom of this action, instead he stood an arm's reach away, hands held awkwardly down at his sides as Alicia tottered before him, tears running down her cheeks and dappling her skirt.

Licking his lips as he fought against his impulse to hold her, Laurence waited a moment before asking, "It's Grace, isn't it? She wrote something disturbing or...or cruel in her letter to you?"

"Yes," said Alicia with a tremble in her voice, scattering more tears to the floor as she nodded. "It was terrible, I'm afraid. Worse than I had expected, even."

She paused, then continued before Laurence could respond. "But...it's not just that. By now I've almost grown used to being treated the way

Grace treats me if you can believe it. She is my sister, after all. And for all her delusions about my getting married before her, she really was worrying over nothing. I had always thought her jealousy hurt only her.”

Alicia wrapped her arms around herself and rocked back and forth, a pained look on her face. “Now, though, just when I feel I finally have found something precious to me when I might know what it is I want from this blessed life...to think that Grace might take it away from me purely due to her own spiteful nature...”

“What do you mean?”

Alicia looked to him with a ferocity that was almost frightening, doubly so when Laurence realized he had asked this question aloud when he’d meant merely to think it.

“She is still trying to control my life, as she always has. Every man who has approached me has so clearly been after the Ramsbury fortune—I have never found them anything more than irritating, you must believe me about that.”

“I do,” Laurence answered softly, without thinking at all.

“But to Grace, they are all equally improper. She finds one thing or another wrong with them, over and above whatever banal reason I find to dislike them...but really, any man would be unacceptable to her.”

Alicia sniffed, looking up to the ceiling as though airing her

complaints to the heavens. "She is the elder sister," she said, this time answering Laurence's question before he could ask it. "If I were to marry before her, it would be a scandal. She would be forever looked on as the old, ugly, unwanted Ramsbury daughter, and would be consigned to live the rest of her life as a bitter spinster."

She emitted a short, mirthless laugh. "That's what she says, at least. I think she hardly needs to find another excuse for her bitterness."

Laurence sighed a long, weary sigh, the gravity of the situation finally sinking in. In a somewhat cold voice, he said, "It will be all right, Alicia. Grace...she is your sister, not your mother. And when you find a London gentleman you truly wish to marry, I'm sure she can be persuaded to—"

"Oh, you complete donkey!" Alicia laughed at him, tears flowing freely down her face once more. "Don't you see? I want to be with *you*!"

The world churned around Laurence. He was afraid to draw breath, as though he might frighten away this miraculous thing that had just happened. All the sound of creation faded away in the thrumming in his ears, and as he fought to keep his heart going, hardly daring to believe it, Alicia's lovely voice cut through the mist.

"Isn't it just the most terrible thing you can imagine?"

Now his heart stopped entirely, and he reached out a hand to the bookshelf to keep himself from collapsing. "Wh...what do you mean?" he stammered.

Alicia bit her lip, her hands clenching together anxiously. "I feel like such a terrible fool. Even besides the objections that she would raise to any man, Grace would never, ever consent to my marrying a man so outside our social class. The scandal *would* be enormous, without a doubt."

Social class, thought Laurence, unable to stop himself from wincing. *You idiot, did you really think even if she would have you that it would be permissible in her world? That she would be allowed to give up all her money and social standing to come live in your pathetic little farmhouse? Or she would bring you into her world, her pet farmer that all the noble ladies and gentlemen could gawk at?* He turned to rest his weight on a table, struggling to draw a clear breath.

"I'm sorry I did this to you," Alicia cried, her hands extended weakly before her. "I should never have accepted your invitation, never brought this pain into your life. I never wanted...I didn't think of what I was doing. And now, because of my blind stupidity, I have caused you such hurt. I'm just...I'm so, so sorry, Laurence."

Despite his occasional passion for books, Laurence had never thought of himself as a particularly intellectual sort. Nature had always been his first and only love, and as he saw things, instinct was far more reliable than thought in almost every case.

Now that his mind was utterly blank, his intellect throwing up its hands at this quandary, he surrendered to his instinct and wrapped his arms around Alicia in a colossal embrace. He felt her immediately slacken, letting her body be suspended by his strong arms, and the two shook with whatever combination of tears and fury consumed them both.

"What am I going to do, Laurence?" Alicia moaned, looking up into

his eyes. Her cheeks were red and streaked with tears, and as he held her soft form close to his body, he could feel her bosom heave with her ragged breath.

As before, as their eyes locked, there was the feeling of a thunderbolt that shook their limbs and drew them closer. They closed their eyes as though to shut out the blinding, divine light that radiated from within them, and their bodies came even closer and closer until there was a collision of mind and sense that shook the very pillars of the world in a glorious, ecstatic kiss.

Laurence wanted to tell her that it would all work out. He wanted to say that she should never have to live her life according to anyone else's desires, that if she stayed right there with him and forgot about everything she knew, he would take care of her forever and always. But instead, he kissed her, long and deep, and that seemed to work even better.

Hot tears stinging his cheeks—he did not know if they were his or hers or both of theirs mingled together—they kissed as a drowning man gasps for breath. Their lips sought purchase on one another's warm, plump mouths, their tongues exchanging short jabs and long, tender caresses as they drew languid moans from one another's throats.

Laurence felt himself pull her closer to the wall, resting her back against a closed door, and he felt her grasp onto him with remarkable fierceness. Her fingers ran through his hair and brushed against the surprisingly sensitive skin on his tanned neck, pulling him closer to her, and closer still.

"Yes," she panted as his teeth nipped at the edge of her shell-like ear. He felt her hot breath whisper more encouragement into his ear as, consumed with animal lust, his hand felt along the smooth curve of

her hip. "Yes, Laurence."

His hands were everywhere at once, feeling at all the marvellous turns and corners of her body. Even as his fingers consumed the globe of her plump derriere, the perfect round fullness of her breasts, he felt Alicia's own small, delicate hands reach down and brush against his insistent hardness, provoking a bestial grunt from deep within him. All the while their lips continued to explore one another with an all-consuming hunger.

At long last, their breaths coming in short, hungry gulps, afraid to pull their bodies apart, they collapsed together on a nearby sofa. Though the fire still burned hot and needy within Laurence, and he felt the heat from within Alicia as he saw it smoulder in her shining green eyes, somehow they pulled back from the brink.

Laurence held her just like that, the two of them resting against the beat-up old divan, her head rising and falling with his inhalations. Despite all that was going on around them, despite the uncertainty of their situation, he felt a sense of utter peace settle over the two of them. Here, in this little room where the motes of dust danced in the amber sunlight, it felt that nothing could ever harm them or take them apart from one another.

And that strange feeling of being tied or connected to some spirit or apparition felt stronger than ever...yet it was now utterly clear to Laurence that this was a good feeling, a warm and welcome feeling. The chain he felt binding him was not restrictive but comforting, like being held by his mother or holding hands with a loved one.

Is this what it feels like to truly love someone? he thought, awestruck.

“Can I tell you something?” Alicia asked as she looked up at him, her eyes beginning to brim with tears once more.

“Anything,” Laurence answered, lifting her fingers up and kissing them gently.

“I am just so very happy that Herbert has taken so long in his task. This has been the happiest time of my life, Laurence. I never knew life could be so sweet and wonderful until I came here and met you.”

He kissed higher up her arm, along her pale, supple wrist. “That...is exactly what I was trying to say by the riverside.” He looked into her eyes once more, feeling a rush of sadness from somewhere in his soul. “It’s a frightening thing, isn’t it? To know the beauty that has been hidden in this world all along?”

“What will become of us?” asked Alicia weakly. “When Herbert returns with the carriage, whenever that is...what’s going to happen? Will I still be able to see you?”

Laurence set his chin, suddenly filled with resolve. He brought a finger under Alicia’s jaw and lifted it up to look at him with an expression of utter seriousness.

“I don’t know, Alicia. I wish I did know what tomorrow might bring. But as uncertain as the future may be, and as lost and confused the whole world seems to have become, I am utterly certain of one thing, now more than ever.”

Alicia looked up at him, eyes wide and lips parted in anticipation.

“I love you, Alicia,” said Laurence.

“Oh, Laurence!” she cried. And as her lips parted to unleash another exclamation of despair, Laurence did the second most intelligent thing he would do all day and kissed her deeply once more.

Laurence would spend a great deal of time later reflecting on just how terrible it was that, just as they succumbed to further celebration of their feelings for one another, the wheels of a carriage creaked up the road to the Gillingham home.

Chapter 14

Waking Dreams

Over supper Herbert breathlessly explained just what had taken him so long to return from Wiltshire with the fully repaired carriage. Though it sounded full of interesting twists and turns, Alicia found herself unable to follow much of his story—not only due to the man’s usual meandering style of conversation, nor to Mary-Anne’s constant stream of jokes and interruptions. No, all evening long Alicia was unable to shake the feeling that she had awoken from a beautiful dream into another, much more ominous dream that she had once taken for real life.

It’s over, she repeated to herself blankly again and again. All this is finished. I’m going back home to London.

Laurence would not even look at Alicia during their meal, and each time she glanced at him she saw his teeth were gritted and his brow furrowed. *I wonder if he is angry with me?* she thought. *Angry for my leaving, for breaking his heart, for misusing his feelings or anything else I might have done in my ignorance.*

Once this thought occurred to Alicia, it proved difficult to shake. Yet she took a perverse kind of comfort in this rumination.

It’s good that he is angry with me, Alicia thought, staring down at her untouched plate of food. *Better angry than despairing—anger can be a good, even satisfactory emotion, and it is much quicker to get over than despair. If it makes his life less miserable, he can be as angry with me as he likes.*

Eventually, with great reluctance from all parties, supper was declared to be over, and one by one they filed to their rooms to sleep. Herbert bid her a tearful good-night, still overcome with worry about leaving her alone for so long.

“It’s...quite all right, Herbert,” she told him, not knowing if she wanted to laugh or cry at the irony of this exchange. “Thank you for taking good care of...everything.”

Seemingly satisfied with this pleasantry, Herbert released a huge yawn and followed Mary-Anne as she showed him to the room where he would be sleeping that night.

“It’ll be good to be back home,” said Jenny as she elbowed Alicia gently in the ribs on her way to the stairs. “Back to your big, fluffy bed, eh, Miss Alicia? When we were in Portsmouth you could hardly talk of anything else.”

Was I really so preoccupied with such trivialities? thought Alicia. But once more she wrestled her mouth into a semblance of a smile. “Indeed. Have a good night’s sleep in the meantime, Jenny.”

“You as well, Miss Alicia.”

For Alicia, though, sleep would not come, and the hours passed interminably slowly as she quietly observed the passage of time through the darkness above her bed. It was not entirely a bad thing, sleeplessness, as she did not wish for this night to pass quickly or easily. All of a sudden, each second in the Gillingham house was a

precious one, soon to be gone and never to return. Which is how Alicia heard what was called up through her open window so readily.

Lying atop her covers, still dressed, she was staring up at the now-familiar rafters of her cosy little room when she heard the stage whisper wafting in with the cool nighttime breeze.

“Alicia!”

Alicia did not even pause to question if her ears were deceiving her—in a trice she was at the window, looking down at the open courtyard of the farmhouse. There, bathed in the light of the full moon, she saw her beloved Laurence peering up at her open window.

“Laurence?” she asked, feeling her heart wrench with a sorrow proportionate to the joy she had felt every time she saw his sweet face until just a few hours before.

He shook his head and mouthed something Alicia could not hear, then gestured somewhere off to his left. Drawing in a deep breath to steady herself, Alicia nodded and retreated from her window.

After a harrowing minute of sneaking past creaking floorboards and sleeping figures, Alicia was out in the moonlit night. Though it had been warm enough to leave her window open since arriving, tonight there was a chill in the air, and she felt rather exposed in her thin, pale blue dress. She felt her nipples peak as she wandered outside in the cool of the night, though she was unsure if this reaction was from the temperature or the odd thrill that came with the fear of discovery.

Her heart thundered in her chest as she looked around at the now-familiar sights of the Gillingham farm. Everything was the same as what she saw through her window, but strange and menacing in the dark of night. The barn loomed overhead cloaked in shadows, its noisy occupants eerily hushed at this late hour, and the dusty road she had walked a dozen times now vanished into the black not fifty yards away even on as clear a night as this.

But where is Laurence? Alicia thought with trepidation. *And what does he want?* The thought of spending even another moment alone with him was a rousing one, but this excitement was tinged with fear, even regret. Was he really angry with her?

“Alicia!”

She jerked her head toward the sound. There he was—standing off at the side of the house, out of sight of any of the windows, a dark hooded lantern in one hand. He motioned for her to approach, and she did so gingerly, glancing up at the darkened house while gliding on tiptoes in his direction.

“Laurence,” she hissed to him as she reached his side. *“What are you —?”*

Laurence lifted a finger to his mouth, then mouthed *“Not here,”* jerking his head toward the house. He reached out a hand, inviting her to take it. Alicia could see that though his expression bespoke real seriousness, he was full of the playful energy of a boy sneaking into the kitchen for a snack, and she surrendered to her desire to join in the fun.

Taking his hand, the two dashed quietly down a familiar dirt path, the

silence only broken once they had put half a mile between them and any prying ears.

“I’m sorry for the circumstances of this outing,” said Laurence, his hand still wrapped warmly around Alicia’s.

“Are you joking?” she replied, squeezing his hand. “I could never refuse an invitation for an adventure, unorthodox though it may be.”

Especially as we may never get a chance for another one, she left unsaid.

“I promised myself I would leave if you didn’t answer my first call. I didn’t want to be...”

Alicia shushed him with girlish energy, charged with the ecstatic life that seemed to be Laurence’s constant gift to her. “Where are we going, exactly?”

His white teeth glittered even under the shade of the trees that lined the path. “Somewhere for a midnight snack.”

The moonlight was so brilliant, the lantern proved fully unnecessary as Alicia followed Laurence’s sure steps over hills and around bends in the path. As they continued to walk, enjoying the silence that surrounded them save the soft pads of their feet on the rough ground, Alicia thought she began to recognize where they were headed. It all seemed like a dream, though, as though they had stepped into a country she had visited within her own mind at night.

When at last she sighted dark shapes in the trees around them, though, she was sure she knew where they were. “I hope you didn’t bring me here because you need more apples picked?” Alicia said with more good humour than she really felt. “These conditions are less than ideal for farm labour, even for as skilled a worker as I.”

Laurence chuckled gamely but did not break his stride until at long last they had reached the top of a hill.

This is where it all really began, thought Alicia, looking out at the explosion of stars that winked down at the black-blue fields in the distance. She turned her gaze down to the grass at their feet. *This is where we sat when Laurence and I kissed for the first time. Where it all finally started to go right.*

Or wrong, she amended with a sombre swallow.

“Alicia,” said Laurence, surprising her. When she looked up at him, she gasped at the sight before her. Just as she had been convinced her picture of the man in her mind was an accurate one, she saw him in an entirely new light and wondered once again at the perfect symmetry of his pointed cheekbones, the immense breadth of his chest, the ethereal glistening of his shining blue eyes.

Who is this man? she marvelled. In the night like this, he seemed perfectly a creature of dreams or a faerie come to bewitch her from his wondrous realm. This image brought a brief smile to Alicia’s face—being visited by such a creature was a wonderful thing, and none the less for the fact that the faerie would inevitably have to fly away.

“I wanted to say...goodbye,” said Laurence, startling her once more

with the deep resonance of his words. “Here, where we can talk without having to worry about anyone or anything else.”

Still half-lost in the sense of being in a dream, Alicia could not stop herself from raising her voice in anger. “Goodbye? As if I have just been a relation paying a visit?” She felt white-hot tears squeeze out and roll down her cheeks, but she did not stop. “What good is it to say goodbye to one another if I will never see you again?”

Laurence’s features twisted with frustration. “What would you have me say? Would you have me tell you that you no longer need to worry about your sister or your family or obligations? That we shall be together forever when you know that can’t be so?”

Alicia opened her mouth to reply, to tell him that he could ask her to stay or tell her he would come for her. But all that came out was an inhuman wail of misery, and then Laurence was all around her, holding her in his powerful arms and shaking with tears as they rocked back and forth.

“I want to tell you those things,” he said softly.

“And I want to hear them. But I understand why you can’t...why you won’t...”

Words suddenly felt as restrictive and unnecessary to her as a hair shirt, and with a powerful rush of emotion she reached up her neck just as he leaned down to her, erasing all there was in the world with a kiss.

The kiss was neither tentative like their first kiss on this hill, nor aching and languid as their kiss by the waterfall. Nor was it the hot, frantic kiss of the library. Still, as each of those kisses had been the best thing ever to befall Alicia, so too was this greater than all previous kisses.

Since Laurence had come into her life and broken the dam of “I want” within her, Alicia felt a flood of desires wash over her, now more than ever. These were strange, powerful longings, ones she had never even considered before this moment, yet they were all-consuming in their intensity. She wanted to never stop kissing him, to strip off her clothes in the pale moonlight, to push him to the ground and give herself to him as fully as any woman can be with a man. She wanted to spend all night with him, and all the nights to come, and without speaking a word she knew Laurence wanted the very same thing.

But the world was too cruel for such things. And that kiss, like all kisses, had to end.

“Do you...” Alicia sniffled, still locked tightly in his embrace on the grass. She paused to look up into his eyes, searching for comfort in their deep blue recesses. “Do you think it has all been worth it? All the hurt, all the loss... Have we been complete fools, allowing ourselves to grow to care for one another knowing we can never be together?”

He squeezed her tighter as he kissed the top of her head sweetly. “I think we may have been. But I would...even with everything that comes with losing you? I would rather be a fool than a wise man who never had the chance to spend his heart on you.”

“You mean it’s really worth it?”

Laurence only said “Yes,” before pulling her in for a tender kiss on the lips.

A crystalline tear dropped from Alicia’s eye as she kissed him back. For the first time since she had known Laurence, she was not sure she believed what he said. But she kissed him back anyway, desperate to make it true under the blanket of stars.

* * *

For the first time since arriving in Dunwood, the weather that morning was dark and grey, a blanket of clouds pulled across the sky and dampening even the calls of the birds.

Alicia blinked, trying to orient herself. Time was passing as though in a dream—she found herself standing outside amid a small circle of people, Herbert and Dennis loading the bags onto the carriage.

She flinched as she felt her hands being taken, then relaxed as she saw it was Mary-Anne, looking at her with great fondness.

“We shall miss you, Miss Ramsbury,” said Mary-Anne. “I shall certainly look you up when I return to London, and I hope we may write one another in the meantime.”

“Thank you, Mary-Anne. Thank you for...everything,” she managed in reply. “I left my address written on a scrap of paper—you may write to me there.”

Mary-Anne pulled her into a tight, friendly hug. Alicia hugged her back stiffly, but her blood froze when she heard what the other woman said softly in her ear.

“I’m very sorry about you and Laurence. I know it is so terribly hard to have to lose someone you have developed such feelings for, especially as you two seem so well matched in so many ways.”

Alicia sniffed, feeling her breath catch in her throat. *Don’t cry*, she cursed herself again. *You’ll only hurt Laurence if you cry.*

They pulled apart, Mary-Anne still holding Alicia by the hands. Still, in a quiet voice, she said, “For whatever little it’s worth, it would be so nice if we lived in a world in which we could live according to our own wants and feelings. I, for one, would surely have liked it if you and I could have been sisters-in-law.”

Alicia’s lip quivered at these words, but clenched her fingers into fists and gave only a curt nod in response.

This must be what she was talking about that night, Alicia realized with grim apprehension. *What was it she said? That it would be ‘cruel’ when this all ended?* She sniffed, feeling her stomach twist into a knot. *She is certainly an intelligent woman. Would that her insight provided any comfort now.*

All the composure Alicia had mustered to keep herself from flying apart vanished at once when she turned from Mary-Anne to see Laurence standing in front of her. He was dressed more formally than she had seen him before, in a smart if threadbare brown suit and stiff-collared shirt of the sort men in London wore. His posture was rigid

and uncomfortable, and his hands worried an old cap in front of him. Alicia had the thought she would laugh at how silly and unlike himself Laurence looked if she were not so full of misery.

The second her eyes landed on his she could not restrain a whimper from escaping her throat, her eyes beginning to well up with tears. But seeing this despair reflected back at her on Laurence's face, and seeing him give the subtlest shake of his head, she firmed her resolve and mentally put on the mask she wore to hide her emotions in everyday London society, the one she did not even realize she used until coming here, where it was no longer necessary.

"Thank you for your hospitality, Mister Gillingham," said Alicia with only a slight quaver to her voice. "I am in your debt for your assistance for the last several days." She dipped into a curtsy that felt at once familiar and distasteful to her, turning her eyes to the ground to avoid having to look up at Laurence and risk dissolving into tears.

"It has been my...*our* pleasure, Miss Ramsbury," he replied coldly.

"If there should ever be any way in which my family can be of help to you and yours, I hope you shall...write, or...or if you should happen to be in London for..."

Alicia stopped, grief leaving her completely paralyzed. *I can't do this*, she thought, looking up at Laurence's handsome face once more. *I don't want to leave. Why should I have to give up this wonderful thing I have found here for the sake of my sister?*

At her distress she saw Laurence's stance shift, as though he were about to reach forward to hold her, to kiss her and never let her go... but then he shot a glance toward Mary-Anne, and with a grave

expression he straightened once more, giving her nothing more than a curt nod.

“It’ll be all day until we get back to London, Miss Alicia,” called Herbert from the seat of the carriage, his voice ringing with fear. “If we don’t leave now we’ll have to hurry, and I’m not much inclined to do that considering what happened last time!”

Alicia looked to Laurence in panic, her body shot through with apprehension. *No*, she thought desperately. *Not yet. Please, don’t let this end.*

But with the sickened smile of a man who had just pulled an arrow from his shoulder, Laurence looked away from her and called to Herbert, “Thank you, Mister Place. Indeed, time to get underway—better that than hurry and risk another accident.”

His blue eyes fell upon hers, unblinking.

Kiss me, she thought. *Tell me to stay. Tell me you’ll have me here no matter what, tell me you’ll never let me go.*

Instead, terribly, he reached his arm out and opened the door of the carriage, then extended a hand to Alicia with a gentlemanly bow at the waist. “May I help you, Miss Ramsbury?” Laurence asked, voice deep and unwavering.

Alicia bit her lip to prevent herself from letting loose with a mournful wail. She nodded mutely, trying not to cry out as she felt his strong, masculine hand grasp hers one last time, and forced her feet to take

the steps up into the carriage.

Everything began happening so fast, in such a blur that it made Alicia think of nothing more than the carriage accident that had brought her here in the first place. As she blinked once, then twice, Jenny was seated opposite her in the carriage—it could have been a new one or the same she had ridden in for her whole life, there was no way she could begin to guess.

“Ho, get on, now, Victoria! On with you, Bess!”

There was the crack of leather, and the carriage jerked with movement.

“Laurence!” cried Alicia, leaning her head and arm out the window toward the only place she had ever felt truly happy. Jenny pulled her back in with a tut and a muttered complaint about safety, but not before Alicia saw Laurence raise one hand in a hesitant wave, a look of despondency on his face.

Then the carriage pulled around the bend in the road, and Alicia was alone once again.

It did not take long for the journey to become tedious, and before long Jenny had fallen asleep, her head lolling gently against the wall of the carriage. To Alicia, though, every second of their voyage felt to stretch for a painful eternity. Every yard the horses pulled them was a yard farther from Laurence, a yard she would never cross again.

Alicia pulled down the shade, shutting out the view of the countryside

that had turned more wonderful and more horrid than she could have ever imagined. At last, the tears she had suppressed all morning burst forth uncontrollably. Alicia's final ounce of self-control was spent keeping herself from making a sound, careful not to wake Jenny.

And so the day was spent in just that state—shedding tears over the long miles that carried Alicia farther and farther away from where it was she longed to be.

Chapter 15

Resumption of Hostilities

“Welcome home, Miss Alicia,” wheezed the aged butler of the Ramsbury Estate.

“Thank you, Mister Wentworth,” Alicia greeted him, her eyes momentarily dazzled by the candles that burned brightly in the entryway. Despite needing to squint to adjust her vision from the dark interior of the carriage, she smiled, happy to see the familiar lined face of her family’s ancient retainer.

As Herbert shook Jenny awake and moved to untie the baggage from the back of the carriage, Mister Wentworth walked slowly beside Alicia toward the open doorway of their London house. It was no ancient, sprawling estate like some of the noble families in the area, but it had always been far too large for the Ramsburys. As a child, Alicia had enjoyed exploring the forgotten nooks and crannies in all the sundry parlours and salons of the looming stone edifice. That is until Grace had begun to terrorize her with stories of ghosts and monsters that lurked in the closets. Ever since, the shadows had been too long and dark in the old house for her liking.

“It’s good to see you back with us, Miss Alicia,” Mister Wentworth said quietly, walking beside her toward the house. “And in such a healthy state, it seems.”

“Yes, well. It’s...good to see home. Especially after such a long time away.”

Before she could cross the entryway, though, Mister Wentworth danced in her path with surprising dexterity, stopping her in her tracks. “Miss Alicia,” he said under his breath. After a short, barking cough, he leaned in closer to her ear. “I’m afraid Miss Grace is... having an unfortunate bout of distemper. A rather virulent one, I’m sorry to say.”

Alicia nodded grimly. “Thank you for telling me so. I had imagined as much.” Seeing Mister Wentworth’s eyes glitter with pity, she gave him a familiar pat on his stooped shoulder. “Perhaps you should retire for the evening a bit early, in that case. To avoid drawing any friendly fire, should it fall your way.”

“Not before I help Mister Place with the bags,” said the butler. “But that...may take some time, I should think. Thank you, Miss Alicia. And Godspeed.” With that, he shuffled away toward the carriage as Jenny caught up to Alicia on the front step.

Here I go, Alicia breathed as she stepped across the threshold into her family home.

“So!” was the first word Grace launched in the direction of her sister. For a long moment, it was the only word, giving Alicia a chance to survey the situation.

Grace and Alicia were only a few years apart in age, but Grace was routinely mistaken for her mother or maiden aunt. Alicia had spent a great deal of time wondering just why this was—their features were not terribly dissimilar in a real sense, after all. Eventually, she had decided it was a matter of behaviour more than nature. Grace’s nose was constantly pointed up to the heavens, giving her a haughty look that belied her youth, and her arms were often as not crossed in front

of her or perched akimbo on her hips, making her seem cross even on the rare occasions when she was not.

As usual, Grace was dressed inappropriately for the occasion. Alicia was unsure just what garments were strictly appropriate for welcoming home a wayward sister, but to her eye, the fur stole and thick red dress was wrong in every direction. The only positive point she could detect was the fetching hairband in Grace's dark, curly hair, and Alicia was fairly certain that ornament was actually hers.

"So!" she repeated. "At last the prodigal sister returns from her misadventures away from home." She huffed, producing a sound of abject derision as she looked at her sister with disdain.

Alicia took a slow, calming breath. She turned to Jenny and quietly said, "You can go ahead and go to your room if you like. We've had a long journey and you should get some rest. Don't worry about tomorrow morning, either."

"Thank you, Miss Alicia," Jenny replied as she discreetly slipped away to the servants' quarters.

"Since you so kindly asked," spat Grace, raising her voice, "no, I am *not* well. As you should well know, having left me to the dogs at the Martens' dinner party."

Grace then stalked away from her sister into the adjoining study. This was a favourite tactic of hers, making Alicia rush after her to continue the conversation so she could pretend to be more harried than she ever really was.

Alicia sighed deeply before following her sister into the study, where Grace was already pretending to busy herself with a book.

“Grace,” she began. “I am not certain how you came to the conclusion that the carriage accident was in any way caused by my actions, but —”

“Yes, as a matter of fact, he *was* there,” Grace interjected.

Alicia blinked, shaking her head slightly. “What? Who?”

“Mister *Carp*,” she replied with an exasperated roll of her eyes. “For goodness’ sake, Alicia, don’t tell me you’ve taken complete leave of your memory as well as your good sense!”

“Carp...” Alicia muttered, stepping into the room on tired legs. The carriage ride was extremely bumpy, and she was still rather sore from the journey. “Do you mean Mister Eric Carp? The...err, the businessman you had seen some time ago? Or sea captain?”

“*Sea captain?*” Grace repeated in disbelief. “Alicia, you cannot mean to say you have been so inattentive that you have forgotten about my incipient engagement with Mister Carp?”

Alicia shuffled wearily to an empty chair as she tried to provoke her brain to follow her words. *What on Earth is she talking about? What is an ‘incipient’ eng—*

“Oh,” said Alicia, putting her fingers to her forehead as she recalled the fight she and Grace had had right before leaving for Portsmouth. Grace had accused her of not being supportive in her pursuit of her latest target. In all actuality, Alicia would have been thrilled to see Grace married and away from the house for good, even if it was to someone she vaguely remembered as being a slimy, grasping industrialist. But of course, just giving her assent was not enough—Alicia was somehow also expected to do most all of the courting and social manoeuvring on Grace’s behalf.

“Yes, Grace, I’m sorry, I believe we did discuss your...ahem, *expected* engagement,” she said, forcing a tired smile. “So what happened? Did he—”

“What happened was an unmitigated disaster!” cried Grace, hiding her face behind an Oriental hand fan. “Mister Carp hardly said a word to me all evening, and by the time the dessert course was served everyone was laughing and singing the praises of some young strumpet at the other end of the table. I looked a complete fool!”

“I’m sorry, Grace, that—”

“Yes, well, you should be,” spat Grace. “It was all your fault, after all, you and your little disappearing act. Honestly, I simply cannot imagine what would possess you to destroy our very carriage just so you could carry on with your little dalliance with that awful Mister Woodruff.”

“Grace, I don’t even care for Mister Woodruff.”

“Really,” Grace continued, looking off into the distance as Alicia’s

fingernails sank into her thigh. “A boy like *that* is absolutely beneath our station. Granted, I think he may be the son of a Baron or something like that, but utterly without any money to his name, or even any winsome personal characteristics whatever!” She laughed, delighted by whatever she had found amusing about her proclamation.

“Grace,” Alicia said in as calm and even a tone as she could manage. “I’m afraid I’m very, *very* fatigued from the journey. Perhaps you could tell me what it is that’s wrong instead of—”

“Yes, I suppose I really am too hard on you sometimes,” Grace murmured, giving Alicia a patronizing smile. “After all, you don’t know what it is to truly give your heart to another, what it is to think on them night and day as Mister Carp surely does for me. One day when you are old enough you will meet some man who will bring that light into your life like that, if you’re very lucky.”

Alicia felt her face harden, teeth grinding in rage. *This is what I returned for? I gave up the love of a good, wonderful man like Laurence to be berated like a child?*

“Though goodness knows even if you were lucky enough to somehow find a man who was somehow fond enough of you to marry you—after I am married, of course—Lord knows you would not have the sense to stay with him while you had him. No sense for people, that’s what I always tell you, Alicia.”

“Grace—”

“But really, to be left alone at that dinner party with that awful Mister Marten,” she barrelled on. “Why, Mister Carp hardly even looked in

my direction, the conversation was so dull and...and *unmanaged* without you at my side to support me.”

“Perhaps if you had a better personality you would not need your little sister to do all your talking for you,” Alicia snapped.

Grace recoiled as if struck. “I beg your pardon?” she asked, her mouth agape.

Alicia rose from her seat slowly, her legs full of a powerfully anxious energy. “Despite everything, I don’t think there’s anything wrong with your hearing, sister,” she said in a calm voice. “You cannot find a husband on your own merits, so you rely on mine instead. Without having me around to abuse and do your talking for you, you are as helpless as a turtle on its back.”

She expected this salvo to turn Grace purple with rage. Instead, Grace gave her a chilling smile, full of equal parts satisfaction and venom. “So that’s it,” Grace said scornfully. “You poor thing. You are just jealous of your older sister, as you have always been. You just can’t stand to be left out of the spotlight for an instant, can you? You never could, even when you were a little brat.”

Her own calm dissolved immediately at this reaction, Alicia gave an inhuman growl of frustration. “You are...absolutely delusional!” she spat. “Do you really think *I* am the one who is envious of *you*? You have been trying to drag me down and claim credit for everything for my whole life!”

Grace laughed at this, but instead of humour Alicia heard nothing but malice in her voice. “And just what would I have to envy about a spoiled, shrewish thing like you? You have hardly been achieving

smashing success in the world of romance, you know. Or any other world.”

“That’s because you have dedicated your every moment to ruining my every prospect! Everywhere I go, everything I do you either berate me for it or sabotage me with whispers behind my back.”

“And you think *I* am the delusional one?”

By now the two sisters were standing nearly nose to nose, their arms quivering with rage. Alicia had not come to blows with Grace since they were young girls, but from the indignation she felt crawling about under her skin, she sensed today might be a break with precedent.

“Of all the arrogant, petty...*cruel* people in the world, Grace, you might be the very worst,” she said at last, her voice shaking.

“Hah! After all I do to keep you fed and housed and safe from undue harm, this is the thanks I get? If Mother and Father could see the ingratitude in their beloved, doted-on little girl, they would turn over in their graves!”

“If I didn’t have a miserable sister like you ruining my life...”

“What?” Grace interjected. “What would you do, Alicia? Go running about, wasting your time going to balls, meeting a new worthless man every week at your social betters’ parties? Giving away your virtue to the first cretin poor who was desperate enough to pursue you?”

An image of Laurence's smiling face flashed before Alicia's eyes, followed by his look of utter dejection on her departure that morning. She felt her heart sink in her chest, devastated at the thought that she had found such happiness the first time she was out of Grace's clutches—now that she was back home, how could she ever expect to find anything good ever again?

Bitter tears squeezed from the corners of Alicia's reddening eyes. *I did not give up my only happiness to be spoken to like this.* "You have no idea what I am capable of without your meddling, Grace."

"Go on, then!" Grace shouted, flinging her fan across the room in a rage. "Continue as you have been doing. I don't see why not. Keep playing about, wasting your time going to balls, meeting new men at parties. None of them will have you, you know. A sickly, pathetic little thing like you will never find someone to take you. Not for our dowry, not for all the money in Britain."

"You're wrong!"

"You think so?" Grace raised a finger into Alicia's face and thrust it threateningly back and forth. "Heed my words, sister: I swear to you on my name as a Ramsbury that you will never, ever marry, not even the lowliest ditch digger, before I am happily wed. So unless you wish to be reduced to a poverty-stricken spinster, you had best abandon this attitude and get to helping me tie down my Mister Carp."

Alicia felt the world close in around her. Knuckles white and trembling at her sides, she answered back with all the force of a cannon blast. "I would rather be a spinster the rest of my life—rather never know the touch of a man, rather spend my days in sorrow and loneliness—than lift a finger to help you."

With that, she turned and raced from the room before Grace could see her dissolve into a puddle of mournful tears. Her sister called something after her, but Alicia could not hear over the grinding of her teeth and the thought she repeated to herself like a mantra.

You utter fool, she said, over and over. *You ruined everything.*

* * *

One thing Grace can't take from me, at least, thought Alicia with a smile of anticipation. *After all that trouble and travel and everything else, at least now I can get into my own wonderful bed.*

The routine of preparing herself for bed was at once comforting in its familiarity. Alicia washed up using her own washbasin, walked bare feet across her own familiar carpets to her own wardrobe where all her old garments were hanging, waiting for her. She changed into her most comfortable silk nightgown, blew out her candle, and slipped, at long last, into her own bed.

Mister Wentworth must have had the linens freshly changed, bless him, thought Alicia as her head hit the pillow and closed her eyes, ready to surrender to the blissful release of sleep.

But if sleep was usually a faithful companion to her, now it was an unruly, wild thing, and escaped her grasp quite completely. Alicia tossed, then turned, then tossed again within a single breath. She fluffed and refluffed her pillow, finding it overlarge and too soft in a way she never had before.

What's wrong with the bed? she thought, trying to avoid the obvious answer waiting for her in her subconscious. *Mister Wentworth must have done something to it. And it's too hot in here by far.*

She kicked the duvet off of her, then walked to open the window to relieve some of the suffocating heat of the summer evening. As soon as she did she winced at the noise of traffic from the street, then exploded in a fit of coughing at the rank air that poured in.

Tears streaming from her eyes, she poured herself a glass of water to soothe her throat and stop her coughing. Just as she drank down the water, recoiling at the stale taste, she heard a muffled “*Stop that dreadful coughing! Some of us are trying to sleep!*” shouted from another room in the house.

Oh, how I hate it here! Alicia thought with a snarl.

As she got back in bed, the enormity of this mental proclamation began to sink in as it rang in her ears. She stared up at the high ceiling above her, hearing herself declare her hatred for this place over and over. Whatever container had held all of her desires for so long, it had now been uncorked, and she could not restrain these wishes from spilling out over her.

I don't want to be here, she thought, trying to ignore the ominous looming of the shadows across her bedroom floor. *I don't want to live with Grace. I don't want to go to balls or meet new men at parties. I want to be back in Dunwood with Laurence. I ought to never have left.*

Alicia's eyes blinked open with the realization of how terribly she had ruined things. *"Lord knows you would not have the sense to stay with him while you had him," her sister had said.*

Damn it all! On top of all her other aggravating characteristics, was Grace right about me?

Chapter 16

Surrender

From the moment the wheels of the Ramsbury carriage left his land Laurence threw himself into his farm work with dogged determination. He had the sense that he was holding shut the gates of his mind to a veritable army of overwhelming thoughts and emotions about what had just transpired—so hold them he did, with heroic resolve.

“Too much work to be done,” he would mutter to himself under his breath. “Can’t leave it any longer. Have to catch up.”

Suddenly the farm seemed to be flying apart at the seams. Over the previous days Laurence had left a thousand chores undone, and the sight of each one provoked a frustrated shake of his head and a redoubling of effort. The crops were dying of thirst in the field, sheep had gone unsheared, unpicked apples beginning to rot on the branch.

All for the best that she left. Can’t take that kind of distraction, Laurence thought, unable to bear the thought of saying it aloud.

On top of everything else, the animals all seemed to have developed a wicked grudge against him—the ducks nipped at his fingers as he was feeding them, Rhea and Robinson would hardly touch their oats, and Bernadette had somehow gotten herself with calf when he hadn’t noticed.

Despite the abundance of labour to be completed, his field hands forever seemed to be absent or else working as slow as molasses and twice as bitterly, and Laurence found himself snapping at them in frustration several times each hour, rushing to do their chores himself.

Worst of all was the look they gave him. Each time he walked past Dennis or Margaret or any of the hands, he saw their eyes widen, their posture turn simpering, mouths contorted in expressions of pity. Each time Laurence would cut off their sympathy by barking an order in their direction, or else stalk away muttering under his breath. This proved successful in preventing any distasteful interactions, and only slightly less successful in warding off brief thoughts of Alicia.

“Got to keep at it,” he would say, marching off to yet another chore. “The daylight is being squandered. Can’t afford it.”

His arms and legs felt like iron rods, stiffly moving through each motion of lifting, carrying, feeding, cutting. He could feel the extreme effort he put into each task take a heavy toll on his body, yet some part of him relished the feelings of overexertion, as they were better than the emotions he knew were lying in wait for him as soon as he found himself in idleness.

And so the day went, with Laurence moving his muscles with the grim determination of an ox. He did not stop for an instant, neither to drink nor eat nor lean for a moment’s rest, until the sun had disappeared over the horizon and the farm was plunged into gloomy blackness.

It was only when he returned to the house, his face filthy and limbs terrifically sore, when Laurence said a single word that was neither murmured to himself nor a snarled order to one of his workers.

“James!”

Mary-Anne was sitting at her usual place at the end of the table, and James now sat beside her, looking oddly dour. Empty plates were in front of each of them, and there was a third plate heaped high with food at Laurence’s spot. Laurence was slightly surprised to see that there was neither a bottle of wine nor a mug of ale in front of James on the table, but paid it no mind for the moment.

“Hello, Laurence,” said James with only a shadow of his usually ever-present grin.

Forcing a welcoming smile to his lips—a task that felt familiar to him in a way he did not expect—Laurence stomped over to the table to give his friend a hearty clap on the back, then took his own seat, suddenly famished.

“Mary-Anne,” Laurence said as he began to chew on a chicken leg. “There’s no accounting for James not asking, but have you not even offered him a tippie? Just because he’s being an unusually polite guest doesn’t mean you have to make up for his lack of poor manners.”

In a quiet voice, Mary-Anne said, “He turned me down, Laurence.”

“Well that’s a first,” Laurence chuckled. “You aren’t going all virtuous on us, are you, James? I cannot begin to imagine what Dunwood will do if their resident troublemaker has become—”

“I came to talk to you, Laurence,” James interrupted, putting his hands on the table in front of him.

Laurence cocked his head, trying to keep a scowl from forming on his brow. He shot a questioning look to Mary-Anne, then back to James. Both of them were as stone-faced as he had ever seen them. “Oh? Whatever about?”

“Oh, come off it, Laurence,” said James, adopting a more familiar if still irritating posture of snappishness. “You’re clearly incredibly upset.”

“Upset? Me?”

“We’re not blind, man. I’ve known you too long to be able to miss it. I’ve not seen you so wound up since...” James paused, then finished, “Well, ever, really.”

“I see it, too,” said Mary-Anne. “I’ve seen you stomping about the farm like a mad bull, shouting at poor Dennis and all the field hands about something or other. This isn’t like you, brother.”

Laurence blinked. He felt the armies of thought gather once more at the gates—he had repelled these invaders all day, but now they surged with ferocity at Mary-Anne’s implication. “I’m sure I have no idea what you mean,” he said, turning his eyes away from his questioners and back to his plate of supper.

For a moment silence reigned over the table, and Laurence stuffed his mouth to hush his thoughts. After a significant pause, he heard James knock on the table to get his attention, and when he looked up he saw his old friend shaking his head with arms crossed.

“No chance, Laurence. I’ve played cards with you too many times to be fooled by your bluff. You’re lying.”

Laurence set his cutlery down on the table with a loud thump and glared at Mary-Anne and James. “And just what it is I’m supposedly lying about?” he asked peevishly. “If you know my emotional state better than I do, what am I feeling that has me so terribly upset?”

James gave a weary sigh. “It’s not as though you’re the first man to ever fall in love, you know. And certainly not the first whose love went away from him.”

“*What?*”

Mary-Anne reached out a sympathetic hand to Laurence’s shoulder. “I’m so sorry, Laurence. If I had known just how deeply you and Miss Ramsbury felt for one another I would never have intervened as I did. I ought not have talked to you that way.”

“Nor should I,” James echoed. “I’m right sorry about bringing all that poisonous gossip from the pub to your ears, Laurence. And for making sport of your affections for the girl. It was cruel of me.”

“It’s...I...” Laurence began. But there, reflected in the pity-stricken eyes of his loved ones, he saw that terrible army staring back at him, and knew he could not bear to face them. He forced a smile, raised up his hands in surrender, and spoke without looking into their eyes.

“Oh, is that what all this is about? Yes, we shall miss our Miss Ramsbury here, without question. A most entertaining visitor; I hope her journey back home is a safe one, now that her business here is concluded. Now, if you don’t mind,” he said, gesturing to the mostly-full plate before him, “I have put in a long day of work, and I am absolutely famished.”

But he had not so much as picked up his fork before James reached over and pulled his plate out of reach. “Here now!” Laurence objected, rising from his seat.

“As a matter of fact, I do mind,” said James. “You think poorly on an empty stomach, but not at all on a full one.”

“I told you, this business is over and done with.”

“And we told you that we don’t believe you,” said Mary-Anne, her face flickering with irritation. “It’s well and good for you to feel as you like. But if you’re going to take out your despair on the rest of us, then it becomes our duty to see you through these feelings.”

“Or get you to act like a man with an ounce of sense, for a change,” James muttered.

“Will the two of you just leave it *alone*?” Laurence snapped. He gave a laugh of disbelief, spreading his arms wide as if to show he was still all in one piece. “I’m completely fine, I tell you. I’m healthy, uninjured, and most importantly, happy to be left to my farm work, as it should be! All is just as it was a week ago, and if all of you will just leave me alone I shall be just as content as ever to live as I always have and always will.”

“That’s just it, though, isn’t it?” asked Mary-Anne. “You can’t go back to the way things were because now things are different. Now there’s something else you want—someone, I mean.”

“You clearly have feelings for the girl, Laurence. You can’t ignore that.”

“And what if I did have feelings for her?” Laurence asked, feeling the gate slip beneath his mental grasp. “It wouldn’t make any difference. She’s gone, and no amount of wishing on my part will change that.”

James shrugged and spluttered as though to show this was an idiot’s question. “Bollocks. If you love her, then go after her. Fight for her. Anything but surrendering at the very first sign of resistance, for God’s sake!”

“But it’s...it’s not as simple as that,” Laurence stammered. “Alicia isn’t —”

“*Alicia?*” James asked, wagging his eyebrows to punctuate Laurence’s apparent familiarity.

Laurence sneered at this gesture and kept up with his protestations. “Even if I wished to be with *Miss Ramsbury*—which I do not concede, mind you—she would never be with me.”

“And why not?”

“She...” he stopped, hearing his voice break as the gates were breached for an instant. *Get a hold of yourself, damn it.* “She is of a different world. She comes from money and has a reputation to protect. She has other suitors, men with titles and money and...and I don’t even know what else.”

Laurence felt himself deflating as he continued to release the thoughts that had simmered at the edge of his mind all day long. “I...I could never offer her the kind of life she wanted here in Dunwood. All the balls and parties and society of London would be out of her life, and she would never want that. Not really. I have nothing to offer her.”

This was the first opportunity Laurence had given himself to give voice to these thoughts. Now, hearing them aloud, they seemed as clear and irrefutable as saying the sky was blue. He felt himself grow still colder and more despondent, his posture collapsing like a tree consumed by rot.

She would never be with me. She is gone for good. I would only drag her down to the level of a poor country farmer. Damn what they say, it's better for her to let her live her life and forget as soon as possible.

“Brother, I may be the smarter of we siblings, but there’s no reason for you to be so thoroughly stupid.”

Laurence looked up, eyes flashing with anger.

James nodded, a characteristic smirk returning to his lips. “I always knew Mary-Anne was the only one of you Gillinghams with any

sense.”

“Well, evidently you are blind enough not to have noticed the fact that she is obviously head over heels for you, for starters. And putting aside the fact that you seem to have ignored my years of complaints about life in London society—”

“Not an easy task, ignoring Mary-Anne,” James chimed in.

Mary-Anne shot James a look before continuing, “You seem to somehow think it is for you to decide what Miss Ramsbury—*Alicia*—can and cannot live with. Your intentions may be noble, but you should know better than to try to make decisions for a woman’s own good. If she wants to be with you, Laurence, and you are foolish enough to gainsay her, then you are even a bigger fool than I thought.”

“To say nothing of what a coward you are being,” said James in a solemn tone.

Laurence stared daggers at his friend. “I beg your pardon?”

“You’d better.” James stood from his chair, adopting a judgmental posture that looked no less intimidating for his slight frame. “All that talk you’ve given me and the other lads about living up to our principles? And now, the first time you’re ever confronted with something that’s important to you besides this farm and you just let it slip away without putting up a fight?”

Mary-Anne tsked loudly. “Perhaps I was right after all, James,” she

said while looking down her nose at her brother. "Perhaps it was all just a bit of fun with a pretty girl, and my brother is not so different from most men after all."

"Now see here," Laurence said menacingly. "I don't want—"

"Imagine getting so worked up over a roll in the hay!" James laughed. "You'll never see me becoming so upset when one of my little flings comes to an end."

"Certainly not!" said Mary-Anne. "I suppose my brother really is just a moon-eyed, sensitive boy to get so flustered when—"

Then the great walls he had built came crashing down, and Laurence surrendered to his feelings. He was not displeased to find the first emotion that flooded through him was righteous fury, and with this he pounded a fist on the table, scattering his uneaten dinner and silencing the others in the room.

"That is *enough* from the both of you!" he bellowed, feeling the cords in his neck standing at attention. "Alicia is not 'a bit of fun,' nor is she 'a roll in the hay.' She is a wonderful, beautiful woman whom I love more than life itself!"

"Then why did you let her leave?" asked Mary-Anne, stunned by this display of outrage but evidently undeterred in her mission.

"I do not intend to!" Suddenly surging with energy, his dinner forgotten, Laurence pushed back from his chair and sprang toward the entryway. "Where did you put the paper with her address?"

Mary-Anne held up the paper between two fingers and gave Laurence a grin of pure warmth. He retrieved it with a grunt and examined the elegantly scrawled words, reviewing the route he would need to take to get there.

London, he thought grimly. If I ride Robinson hard I should be able to get there in a few hours.

“I say, I hope you’re not thinking of riding before morning?” James asked.

Laurence shot him a look and raised a finger in warning. “Right though you may be, you have been quite enough help with your blasted advice, my friend,” he said, at least half-serious in his threatening posture. “I would not push my luck if I were you.”

James sank back in his chair, hands up in appeasement. “Agreed.” He was quiet for a single breath before he struck up an impish smile and rolled his eyes towards Mary-Anne. “In that case, I shall use the last of my luck to take you up on that offer of a drink.”

Out of the corner of his eye, he could just detect Mary-Anne and James sharing a laugh, one full of satisfaction and shared affection. But he could not pay them any further mind as he walked toward the barn to ready his horse to ride at dawn. Now that he had given free rein to the invading thoughts of Alicia, he could do nothing but surrender to their passion.

I ride at first light, he said to himself, chin set with determination. I will

win Alicia's heart or die in the attempt.

Chapter 17

Uncrossed Paths

The night was a long and restless one, and Alicia was surprised to find that first light brought immediate clarity to her mind.

I have to go back, she thought to herself, impressed with the self-evidence of this conclusion. *Whatever I thought was keeping me here in London cannot be worth the price I must pay for it. Let Grace disown me, let her rant and rave and swear vengeance—it does not matter. I have to go back.*

Feeling suddenly light and unencumbered, she went through her normal morning routine with great alacrity, giving not a care that she might be going through these steps for the very last time. As she bathed, brushed her hair, dressed herself, she even found herself humming a strange little tune she eventually remembered was something she had heard Mary-Anne singing idly one day. All the while, the same insistent refrain beat within her.

I have to go back.

“Jenny?” she said to her devoted maid as soon as she was dressed. Jenny looked to her with an air of expectation. “Get dressed quickly, please, and ask Herbert to ready the horses. The same horses, if they are ready to run, or fresh ones if necessary. We leave for Dunwood in half an hour.”

Alicia was unsure just what Jenny's reaction to this insane order would be—whatever it was, she was not expecting Jenny to whoop with joy and wrap her in a strong embrace. "Oh, Miss Alicia, I was wondering when you'd get your head on straight!" she laughed. "Of course, I was hoping it might be before having to go back all that way in that creaky old carriage, but..."

"There will be time enough for 'I told you so' on the road," said Alicia, squirming out of her maid's grasp. "Please, go quickly."

Jenny nodded, chuckling to herself as she packed her knitting back in her little bag and toddled off to find their driver.

Now for the difficult bit, thought Alicia with a grimace, stepping out of her room without so much as a backward look.

As she took the long route down the polished grand staircase of the Ramsbury house, a dozen possibilities for how to make her escape ran through her mind with each step. She could sneak out behind Grace's back, certainly; all it would take was a flimsy excuse about paying someone a social call, particularly if it were on Grace's behalf. She could wait until Grace was away on a visit of her own, though that would leave her without the carriage. And of course, there was the problem of her possessions.

Will I be able to come back once I leave? she asked herself, walking slowly down the white marble steps. *If Laurence will have me, will I be permitted to stay at his house for the time being? Can I send for my things—those I still care to keep, that is—or will Grace begin scissoring my dresses in half the moment I am out the door? Perhaps I should go back up and pack a trunk with my most precious things before leaving...*

By the time she reached the foot of the stairs, however, Alicia's mind was made up. Grace's abominable behaviour notwithstanding, there was only one way to exit this scenario: honestly and quickly.

"Good morning, Grace," called Alicia to the far end of the table as she walked into the dining hall.

"Hmm, yes, quite," returned Grace from her usual high-backed seat. Though it was a warm summer morning, Grace was dressed in her typical high-necked, long-sleeved gown that was as seasonally inappropriate as it was out of fashion. "You seem to be in a better mood this morning, I'm glad to see."

"Yes, thank you, I am," replied Alicia with a genuine smile. Still standing near the doorway, she took a fond look around the dining room. Alicia had always loved this room best of all in the house. The crystal chandelier hanging from the ceiling always caught the afternoon light most beautifully, sending colourful prisms arcing across the pastoral oil paintings that bedecked the walls. She smiled as her eye fell on a winter scene that had always been her mother's favourite.

For the barest instant, she felt a tinge of regret at leaving all this behind for good to return to the countryside. It was funny, really—not a week before she would have dismissed this idea as completely preposterous. But all it took was a second's remembrance of Laurence's shining face and Alicia felt her resolve strengthen.

"It's good that your escapade has left you less of a layabout than usual," said Grace as she sipped her tea, her breakfast all but uneaten on the plate before her. "There is much to do today."

“Oh? Why? What do you have planned?” asked Alicia lightly. Ordinarily, she would have rather pulled her teeth than listen to Grace dictate the day to come. Today, though, she knew she needed to buy Herbert at least a few more minutes to ready her means of departure.

“I think it best to start with the two of us paying a visit to Lady Mumford—she’s the widow of the late Duke, you know. She doesn’t let just anyone in for a visit, but her opinion shall be critical for re-establishing my reputation properly among the ton after you so callously allowed our name to be dragged through the mud.”

“I see.”

“From there we may have a moment for a spot of lunch at that Parisian salon I told you about. You remember, the one where every lady who expects to be somebody needs to be seen. Parisian, I think, or...Florentine? Or Spanish?” Grace frowned and looked for her answer up at the ceiling. Not finding it there, she waved her hand dismissively. “No matter, you’re the one with the head for those sorts of finer points.”

“I suppose so.”

“Now, Mister Carp is expected to be at the performance of some play or something this evening, at the new theatre they just opened. *Troy*... Troy and somebody, I think.”

“*Troilus and Cressida*?”

“How would you know? Anyway, it doesn’t matter,” said Grace

impatiently. "You and I must be seen at the play, that is the important thing."

"I didn't think you enjoyed the Bard's works."

"Who? Honestly, Alicia, can't you keep your mind on what we're actually talking about for more than a few seconds? The important bit is that sometime during the second or third act I shall faint dramatically, prompting Mister Carp to come and help revive me."

"You're planning on interrupting a professional play so you can feign helplessness to ensnare a man into helping you?"

"Yes!" Grace said with evident glee. "Isn't it brilliant?"

Alicia pondered her sister's previous schemes to entice men into the possibility of an engagement. "It's certainly...ambitious, I grant you that. Though I can't guarantee everyone will be pleased to see you stealing the show."

"Oh, who asked you?"

"It sounds as though you have a busy day planned, sister," said Alicia with as close to a fond smile as she could summon.

Grace rolled her eyes and gave a bitter sigh. "Well? Aren't you going to sit and have some breakfast? I've no patience for waiting for you to finish playing around so we can get to actually important business."

“Oh, there’s no need to wait on me, Grace.”

“Fine. In that case—”

“I’m afraid I won’t be joining you on this particular escapade, as it happens.”

In the middle of rising from her chair, Grace paused to emit her signature false, disdainful laugh. “What do you mean? Just what will you be doing instead?”

“I will be returning to Dunwood, actually,” she said, fighting to keep her voice calm.

“Where?” Grace asked, uncomprehending.

“The place in the countryside where I was stranded until yesterday.”

Alicia swallowed, her courage threatening to falter. *I have to go back. I have to go back.*

“I met a man there, Grace,” she continued as steadily as possible. “Laurence Gillingham. I mean to see if he will marry me.”

Alicia had not thought Grace was holding a teacup, yet there was a crash that filled the dining hall as the porcelain vessel dropped from her fingers and shattered on the tabletop.

“Absolutely not!” barked Grace, straightening herself to her full height. “That is out of the question!”

“He is a good man, Grace,” Alicia said coolly, beginning to walk backwards toward the door. “Honest, upright, a pillar of his community. I love him, and I believe he loves me as well. If he will have me, I intend to live with him on his farm in the countryside.”

“Outrageous!” Grace continued, advancing on her now. “Vile! Insolent!”

“I will be taking the carriage again, I’m afraid.” *Keep moving, Alicia. One step at a time, you’re nearly there.* “But after I reach an agreement with Mister Gillingham I will have Herbert bring the carriage back right away. You will still be able to make it to your important social affairs next week, and we can discuss the practical points of the dowry and my things then.”

“Of...of all the ridiculous...backwards...unreasonable...” From this last word Grace lapsed into incoherent noises of spite, flecks of spittle flying from her lips as she continued to stomp in Alicia’s direction.

“I’ll let you consider the end of that sentence for a while, sister,” said Alicia, then turned to hasten her exit.

“Hold on for just one moment!”

Against her better judgment, Alicia paused mid-turn. She craned her head back around to see what Grace had to say. Her sister’s face was twitching now, her skin turning a lovely shade of violet as she swelled herself up still larger with malice in the manner of a cobra.

“You...are not going...*anywhere*,” spat Grace, seething with rage. “I forbid you from leaving, and I certainly forbid you from even entertaining the idea of marrying some...some *country bumpkin*! And before your older sister marries! It will be the death of this family, and I will not allow it!”

Alicia expected herself to grow angry at this pronouncement, to shout back at her sister and plead her case. But for the first time, she found that she had nothing but pity for Grace at this moment. And so it was with great gentleness that she said, “That’s where you’re wrong, Grace. You cannot dictate my own life to me any longer. I’m through with helping you get what you want—it’s time at last for me to pursue what *I* want. Goodbye, sister.”

And with that, before she could even witness Grace’s reaction, she completed her turn and strode out into the corridor. She could see the sunlight pouring in the open front door and picked up her pace into a near-run.

But Grace proved less easy to shake than the previous night, and Alicia could not ignore the sounds of her polished leather shoes tapping rapidly across the floor after her.

“I tell you, you cannot *do* this!” Grace screeched, hastening to catch up with her.

“I suppose we shall see about that,” Alicia called over her shoulder.

“You’re throwing your life away!”

“It’s my life.”

By now Alicia had reached the open door, next to which she could see the family butler standing at attention. He nodded to the portal and gave her a fond, toothless smile.

“Goodbye, Mister Wentworth, and thank you,” Alicia said without pausing.

“Godspeed, Miss Alicia,” said the butler, closing the door firmly behind her.

Alicia could clearly hear sounds of blood and fury escaping from behind the closed front door of the Ramsbury house as Grace excoriated the poor servant. But even as she worried for Mister Wentworth’s safety, she did not break her stride, and in a trice, she had hopped into the carriage beside Jenny and Herbert urged the team into motion.

Hold on, Laurence, she thought, any worries about Grace now vanished completely as the horses pulled them down the road that led out of the city. *I’m coming back to you.*

* * *

The road was a long and bumpy one, and Herbert's moans of protest could be heard echoing over hill and dale as he pushed the horses to a canter. But his hands steered them true, and Alicia sighted the outside of the Gillingham farm just as the flaming sun brushed the treetops on the horizon.

"Laurence!" she cried, flinging open the door before the carriage had fully come to a stop in front of the farmhouse.

"Miss Alicia!" Jenny called after her in alarm. But Alicia was deaf to this caution. Her feet flew across the dry, cracked dirt, her heart warmed by the familiar sights that she could scarcely believe she had seen just the day before.

Thoughts filled her head of the reception she would get on seeing Laurence. How he would smile as she threw herself into his arms, how she would explain that she was a terrible fool to leave, how she would stay with him for all time if he would have her. And he would agree and kiss her and the world would forever be one long, happy summertime.

Throwing open the door without even thinking to knock, Alicia called up the stairs, her voice echoing from the rafters and filling the old house. "Laurence! I've come back!"

She paused to consider his apparent absence. *At this hour Laurence would be in the fields, most likely. I wonder where...*

“Miss Ramsbury!”

Alicia turned to see Mary-Anne coming from the parlour, rubbing her eyes as if awakened from a nap. Unable to contain her excitement, she wrapped her arms around the other woman and embraced her tightly.

“Oh, Mary-Anne, it is so good to see you!” she thrilled.

Mary-Anne gave her a hesitant if affectionate pat on the back, then pulled back and looked over her shoulder in confusion. “But...what are you doing here? Is Laurence with you?”

Alicia felt her heart seize at these words. “Wh-what?” she asked, smiling in bewilderment. “What do you mean? Isn’t Laurence here?”

Mary-Anne took Alicia’s hands in her own, squeezing them and looking to her with sisterly affection. “I suppose you must have missed one another on the road, then. Ah, well.”

“What do you mean, ‘missed on the road?’ Where is Laurence?” Alicia demanded, a tone of alarm creeping into her voice.

“How beautiful this all is!” Mary-Anne laughed. “Just this morning Laurence rode for London, fast as lightning. Gone to tell you what I assume you came here to tell him. You two really were made for one another!”

After a moment to piece together what she was being told, Alicia burst into laughter as well. *Laurence does not hate me for leaving*, she thought, tears of relief running down her cheeks. *He came to get me just as I came back for him. He really does love me as I love him!*

Then a shadow passed over her, and Alicia stiffened as her veins filled with fear.

Grace.

“Oh, no,” she said softly. “No, he couldn’t...she wouldn’t...”

“What is it?” Mary-Anne asked, concerned. “What’s wrong?”

“If he’s gone to London, then all he will find at my house is Grace.”

“Well surely that can’t be too terribly bad. He may have to stay the night, there or somewhere else in the city—London has no shortages of rooms for farmers in from the country. But we can just wait here for him until he returns, can’t we?”

“...Yes,” Alicia said, a gnawing feeling at the pit of her stomach. “I suppose that’s all we can do.” She followed Mary-Anne to the parlour for a cup of tea, her feet shuffling as though she were lost in a fog.

Happiness seemed so close at hand...will it all be for naught if Grace has her way?

Chapter 18

A Vipers' Den

As it turned out, the easy part of the journey was the long stretch of country roads. Though they were all unfamiliar to Laurence, particularly the main thoroughfare from which he'd first collected Alicia, they proved easy to navigate. All roads, it seemed, led to London.

But the city itself was a different matter. As the sun dipped lower in the sky and Robinson grew tired and sweaty, the road became crowded. First, he found himself having to steer his horse around hay wagons and country folk on foot, but as the sky became thick with dark smoke and twinkling lights appeared through the haze on the horizon, the road was populated with all manner of sinister figures.

If the road into London was long, the rat's nest of winding lanes and alleys in the city itself was so much the longer. Buildings tall as trees loomed over him, and poor Robinson dragged his hooves through rivers of garbage and filth as they haplessly failed to navigate the cobbled streets. Eventually, Laurence decided he would only be able to find his way with the guidance of a local citizen.

"Excuse me, sir, can you tell me where I might find...?" Laurence asked a passerby. But the man only continued to pass him by, no answer to his question but a glob of spit cast to the ground. He redoubled his effort with other Londoners to similar effect:

"Pardon me, do you know where...?"

“Madam, I’m sorry to trouble you, but I’m afraid I don’t...”

“Could you tell me the way to...?”

This is madness, thought Laurence, trying to keep his cool. *Thousands of people in the street, and not one of them willing to help a stranger*. He shook his head as he grimly remembered the afternoon when a carriage accident had brought a dozen Dunwood natives to the aid of one of London’s own.

“Oi, guv, I’d be happy to show yer around,” came a gruff but friendly voice speaking an unfamiliar dialect. Laurence turned to see a burly man with close-shaven hair and a glass eye—an intimidating appearance that was belied by his welcoming smile and casual posture.

“Oh, thank God, I was beginning to think I’d never find my way,” Laurence laughed, stepping closer to the man. “I’m trying to find my way to—”

“Oh, yes, it’s right terrible, the roads around this city,” the man interjected, his arms still folded as he leaned against a low stone wall. “From out in the country, are you, then?”

“Yes, I’m afraid so. If I’d known this city was so damnably big I would have gotten better directions before I came!” Laurence produced the piece of paper with Alicia’s address written on it and held it out to his seeming saviour. “This is where I’m trying to find, if you happen to know the way.”

The man's eyes glittered with laughter as he shrugged helplessly. "Afraid I ain't much for readin', guv. Where is it you're tryin' to go to, exactly?"

Laurence winced and cursed himself for being presumptuous. "Apologies. It says the house is in...Smithfield? On a street called—"

Abruptly the man left his position by the wall and stood close to Laurence, then pointed a sausage-like finger to some inscrutable point on the horizon. Though taken aback, Laurence tried not to shudder at the man's overpowering smell. "Right, easy as pie. Y'see that church steeple?"

Laurence squinted, trying to make out the shape on the horizon. "Which one?"

"Just over there, near the tall, square rooftop. That's it, guv, over that way a bit further."

"...I don't think—"

He was nearly ready to give up and ask the man for a different landmark to orient himself when he detected movement behind him. With a sudden rush of adrenaline, Laurence pushed out with both arms and bounded forward, turning to see a small man whose fingers had nearly closed around his purse.

"Brigands!" Laurence bellowed, putting up his fists ready to defend

himself. “Robbers!”

By the time he glanced around to see if anyone heard his cry—if they had, they gave no sign, and continued to walk about on their own business—the two ruffians had disappeared in a cloud of mocking laughter. Laurence spat in frustration, his face a mask of rage as he moved to leave this place he had found himself in.

Alicia, I cannot for the life of me imagine why you would willingly live in this awful place, he thought, swallowing and mounting Robinson once more to find somewhere better to get his bearings. He cast a nervous look at the sun, which had nearly disappeared. *Have to hurry. Given my apparent haplessness, I may not survive this blasted city after dark.*

* * *

At long last, when the streets were lit with flickering yellow lamps and the shadows were long and ominous, Laurence found his way to his target.

Though he was unsure just what he had expected—in truth, searching his mind, he realized he had not even attempted to picture the house that Alicia lived in—he found himself surprisingly disappointed at how...ordinary it looked. Like all the other houses he had passed over the previous hours wandering through London, this was a towering stone edifice, ugly and utilitarian despite being bedecked with all manner of unnecessarily garish architectural touches. The lamplight flickered over the looming house, casting monstrous shadows over its façade, and the moon bore an eerie yellow pallor in the London sky.

Which part of it is where Alicia and her sister live, I wonder? he took the time to wonder, suddenly anxious at the prospect of knocking on the

door. *Or is this enormous, ugly house all for her family?* Not for the first time, Laurence felt a gnawing at the pit of his stomach, and a voice that sounded suspiciously like his brother-in-law's whispered that he was truly a poor, ignorant farmer.

The sound of feral dogs baying somewhere down the road jostled Laurence back to reality. He once again struggled to summon the resolve that first sped him along on his journey. Holding Robinson's reins tight in his fist, he beat his fist heavily on the wrought iron gate, wincing at the pain that shot through his fingers. After a moment or two of waiting in silence, he noticed a cord hanging from an ornamental opening near the gate. Shrugging, he pulled the cord and was rewarded with the distant tinkling of a bell.

After a scant minute, an old man in an impressively ornate uniform appeared on the other side of the sharp iron bars. The man's eyes were rheumy and tired-looking, but the up-and-down look he gave Laurence seemed to dissect him into tiny pieces.

"I'm sorry, we are expecting no deliveries tonight. Good evening to you." Then the old man straightened to his full height and turned back toward the house.

"Wait!" Laurence cried. "I am not delivering anything...uh, sir. Mister. Sir."

The gentleman turned back toward him once more and gave him a sidelong glance. "Wentworth. Are you sure you are not lost?"

"I certainly have been enough today, Mister, ah, Wentworth. But I am hoping my fortune may have finally taken a turn for the better. Is this the Ramsbury residence, perchance?"

If the look he was given before was penetrating, this one cut like a razor blade. "If it were, what business would you have with either of the Miss Ramsburys?"

This is it! Laurence thought, his heart thundering with excitement and relief. But the look of the man behind the gate was not a promising one, and the sounds of the dogs were now mingling with other, more sinister noises. *I have to get inside. Can't be turned back now.*

Mister Wentworth continued to inspect Laurence, seemingly uninterested in waiting for a reply. As his eyes lingered on the horse, though, his frown deepened in a strain to recollect a familiar sight. Then he snapped his fingers as though realizing something. "Are you bearing a message from the countryside for Miss Grace, then? We had one of your ilk here not long ago."

Laurence barely hesitated before blurting out, "Indeed I am."

Wentworth gave a business-like nod, then extended his empty hand. "Very well. Hand it here and we shall see about your payment."

Uh-oh. "I have...ridden long and hard today," Laurence said cautiously. "So if I might be permitted to speak with her instead...?"

"Absolutely not," said the old man, unmoving from his stance on the far side of the bars. "A request like that is quite unacceptable, not to mention highly unusual. Why do you not simply give the message to me so I can deliver it? Quickly, so both of us can be back to our business promptly?"

Laurence racked his brain for any suitable excuse. Being unused to subtlety, he found himself unable to conjure a reason to refuse this request. *Think, damn you*, he cursed himself, seeing Mister Wentworth's foot begin to tap impatiently. In desperation, he turned to literature for inspiration, as he often did, and quickly found a solution in some chivalric story whose name he could not recall at the moment.

"I...cannot," he said at last, marshalling his thoughts as quickly as he could. When the other man gave him a sceptical raise of his eyebrow, Laurence clarified with a rush of enthusiasm, "The...contents of the message are too precious to be written down. If they fell into the wrong hands, my...employer told me the consequences would be ruinous. So I memorized the message instead."

The old retainer blinked, looking taken aback for the first time.

"Miss Grace will be most unhappy if she does not receive this news promptly," Laurence ventured, hoping he was not overextending his luck. "It is quite urgent."

Wentworth gave a strange, preoccupied sigh. "I shall have to inquire with Miss Grace about this. Wait here," he said, then hastened away before Laurence could object.

Laurence peered through the gate after the man, hoping his artifice was believable enough to get him in the door. *I pray you will forgive me for the deception, Alicia*, he thought, wondering which of the darkened windows on the far side of the gate was hers.

Chapter 19

Waiting for the Thunderclap

The sound of metal wrenching against metal surprised Laurence enough to send him flying a foot into the air. With the gate slightly ajar, Mister Wentworth wordlessly gestured for Laurence to follow him inside. The old man said in a wary voice that he would see to his horse, but now Laurence was so charged with anticipation that he could scarcely do more than nod.

You've made it, Laurence, he thought with satisfaction, walking through the side door into the enormous house. *Only a short while longer until Alicia is back in your arms, and from there no thief, no city can set you wrong ever again.*

The door opened into a grand corridor that Laurence took an immediate dislike to. The ceiling was higher than any man could need, and it was at once both stuffy and cold in the windowless hallway. Stepping inside slowly, he paused in front of what looked like a long-forgotten family portrait of two young girls sitting on a wine-coloured divan.

That must be Alicia! he thought with a smile, examining the familiar chestnut-coloured curls and green eyes of one of the girls. Then he looked closely at the other and saw a pair of dimples that he had also seen on the face of his beloved. *Perhaps the two sisters are not so dissimilar as I had thought. Could this Grace really be as terrible and cruel as Alicia has claimed?*

“Miss Grace is waiting for you in the salon.”

Laurence started at the voice calling to him from behind his back. Returning to the gate to gather the reins of Laurence's weary horse, Mister Wentworth was giving him a look of suspicion.

"Yes, ah, thank you," he called back in as friendly a voice as he could conjure.

"Turn left at the end of the corridor, then the third door on the right."

Laurence tossed a friendly wave of comprehension over his shoulder before hastening down the hallway as directed. He fancied he could feel Alicia's presence in this house, could almost smell her sweet perfume steeped in the walls and furniture, though in truth the place still felt cold and alien to him. Still, the thought gave wings to his feet, and he fairly skipped through the only open doorway, so sure was he that Alicia was just around the corner waiting for him.

Contrasting with his previous impressions of the house, the room in which he now found himself was a beautiful setting. The only element that did not quite match the aesthetic harmony on display was the young woman in a peculiar black dress reclined on a chaise longue. Something about her—her expression, her posture, the odd tufts of lace at her shoulders—struck Laurence as vaguely unsettling, a feeling that was only heightened as she shot him a cold look without moving from her place.

"Yes?" she asked. "I am Grace Ramsbury. What is this message you are carrying for me, now?"

“I’m afraid there has been a bit of a misunderstanding,” said Laurence, shifting his weight from foot to foot. “You see, I was unsure if your servant would...I do not really...” He discarded one excuse, then another, before deciding it would be best to cut to the heart of the matter instead. “I have come to see Miss Alicia Ramsbury, actually.”

The woman’s features darkened, her eyes glistened in the candlelight. Grace looked him over once more, her eyes betraying a caustic glare barely hidden behind her long brown lashes. “And just who are you, sir, to deceive your way into our house to call on my sister?”

“Laurence Gillingham,” he answered simply. Seeing the woman’s blank expression, it occurred to Laurence that more might be required when introducing oneself to a proper gentlewoman, so he stammered, “Of, er, Gillingham Farm. In Dunwood, to the south. At your... service?” He gave a quick bow, suddenly aware of how awkwardly his frame fit among the delicate furniture and decorations of the room.

“Oh!” the young woman exclaimed, covering her mouth with a dainty, gloved hand in surprise. “Then...you are the man with whom my sister stayed while our carriage was damaged.”

Laurence laughed, awkwardly rubbing his neck before he realized the shower of road dust this would scatter onto the elegant carpet. “Indeed, I had the privilege of aiding Miss Alicia in her moment of need. In fact, I was hoping to see her, which is why I have ridden here this evening. If she is not indisposed, perhaps I could just—”

“Why, that’s splendid!” Grace interjected, rising from her seat and giving Laurence a third thorough examination from head to toe. For a moment, as her expression flickered for just an instant, Laurence had the strangest feeling that he was a steer on the butcher’s block. “Splendid,” she repeated. “Just marvellous.”

Err...thank you, yes, I—”

“But won’t you sit down?” Grace said sweetly, gesturing toward a nearby empty wooden chair. “You must be terribly weary after your travels, I imagine. Please, I beg you, make yourself welcome.”

Laurence grinned innocently. *Whatever problem Alicia may have had with her sister, the woman certainly is more hospitable than I had imagined.* “Thank you, Miss Ramsbury, that is good of you.” He sat heavily in the chair, suddenly acutely aware of how sore his limbs felt from his hard ride.

Looking up, he again saw a flash of something cross Grace’s face, but then it was erased once more by her friendly smile. “Do you need anything? I could send for some food, perhaps, or a glass of wine?”

“No, thank you.” Though Laurence’s stomach was powerfully empty from the day’s exertion, the thought of Alicia behind one of the row of doors he had passed filled him with more appealing sustenance. “Is Miss Alicia in, then, or would it be best—”

“It is so very good of you to have watched after my wayward sister!” laughed Grace, posing once more on her long seat. “Why, my sister has told me so much about you.”

Laurence felt himself smile, picturing how Alicia might describe him to an elegant woman such as this. “It was my pleasure. Your sister is a very special woman.”

“Hah! More than even I know, it seems.” Her smile beat down on him like the noonday sun. “To think that she shared such an...intimate week with a strapping man such as yourself.”

His heart leapt into his chest at these words. *I say, how much did Alicia tell her sister about us?* Suddenly filled with worry about his beloved's reputation, he half-stood and put his hands up in a reassuring posture. “Miss Ramsbury, I hope you do not misunderstand my affections for your sister. While I may not be a respected member of your social circles, I in no way impugned Alicia's honour or allowed her reputation to be damaged, I promise you that.”

“Certainly not,” Grace said simply through her frozen smile.

He looked at Grace carefully before continuing. *She is important to Alicia, and by all accounts a friendly and personable woman,* he reasoned. *Even if I do not need her permission to ask to court Alicia, it could not hurt to do this as properly as I can manage.*

“In fact,” Laurence continued purposefully, “That is rather the reason I have come to pay her a visit. I had intended to...court Alicia in earnest. Her visit was ended rather abruptly, and I had hoped we could discuss...well, what the future holds for us.”

As soon as the words left his mouth Laurence had the sensation of having seen lightning flash in the distance. Now, the silence that fell over the stuffy room was as long and expectant as the pause between the lightning and the thunder. Laurence felt his throat prickle, felt a drop of sweat roll lazily down his temple.

Then came the thunderclap.

“Oh. Oh.” Grace sat straighter in her seat, a look of distress coming to her thin face. “You mean...oh, I am so sorry, you must have misunderstood my sister.”

He blinked, feeling his heart hammer harder in his chest. “What do you mean?”

“Please understand, it’s nothing against your character, I’m sure,” said Grace with a smile full of pity. “I cannot claim to know just what happened between you and Alicia at your...property. All I know is what Alicia told me on her return, and on that point, she was most unambiguous.”

“What...unambiguous about what?” Laurence said dumbly.

She paused as though in thought. “I do not wish to abuse your feelings, sir. Perhaps it would be best for me to tell Alicia later that you paid her a visit, or for you to write a letter. This is all just so frightfully untoward, and—”

“Just say it. Please.”

Her eyes flashed as she smiled at him still more broadly. Laurence could not tell if she was sad or was relishing telling him this. “My sister does not have any desire to see you any more, Mister Gillingham. Not tonight, and not ever again. She told me quite clearly that she is looking forward to putting this whole episode behind her and forgetting about it so she can return to her normal life.”

Laurence felt the world swirl about his head, then his vision contracted to the barest pinprick of light. “No,” he gasped. “No, that’s not...”

“I do apologize on her behalf, sir,” said Grace with a sympathetic pout. “Playing with your feelings like that was most unkind. Unfortunately, it is all too common for a flighty young woman like my sister. She is forever playing at love with some man or another who passes through her life. If you only knew how often I’ve had to comfort her after she pledged her heart to this man or that on a silly whim of hers. But really, you must have known a real relationship with Alicia was always out of the question.”

“I...” was all that escaped his throat, devoid of sense or thought. “I...I don’t...”

“After all, can you imagine?” Grace gave a most unbecomingly girlish laugh, unfolding an Oriental fan and beating it in her direction as though warmed by her own humour. “My sister is one of the most desirable young women in London society! She has been entertaining offers of marriage from several eligible young men—rich men, London men—for some time now. Why, Mister Woodruff has been by to visit her just in the last week or so. To think that she would throw away all her prospects, all her family’s future, to be with the likes of you! No offence intended, of course.”

This cannot be. Not Alicia. She told me...I thought her affection was as true and pure as my own. How can it be that she fooled me so completely? Laurence shook his head faintly. *There must be some mistake.*

“May I speak with her?” Laurence asked from deep within the miserable pit he felt himself sinking into.

Grace spread her arms wide and cocked her head to one side, shaking her head with a sad smile. "I do apologize, sir, but I must respect my sister's wishes. If you wish to leave word for her, I'm sure my butler can write down your thoughts for you."

Laurence continued to shake his head, as though to dismiss this conversation like a bad dream. Nothing about this made sense. Unless everything Alicia had said to him, all she had told him...

It was all a lie, wasn't it? he thought, feeling the walls close in about him still further. *I was nothing more than a plaything for a spoiled rich London girl.*

The thunder continued to roll through the house, a roaring in his ears drowning out the sound of whatever Grace was saying. He was dimly aware of himself rising to his feet, stepping out of the room, retracing his steps back to the stable, taking Robinson's reins, walking out into the dark London street.

Can you imagine? he repeated to himself, his limbs still moving mechanically into an unknown direction. *With the likes of you?*

Can you imagine?

Chapter 20

Long Days and Longer Nights

Alicia's legs pumped furiously, pushing her across the field of dry brown needles and through the rows of bare, dead branches. Her feet were bare, and the limbs were covered in thorns that clawed at her skin, but she continued to race as fast as she could.

The pine boughs pushed closer and closer, until at last Alicia was thrown back, unable to progress any further. She whirled around, her eyes casting about the familiar forest for any indication of where she was. She knew this forest, she was sure, but she could not find the way forward. She felt the tears running freely down her face, tasted their wet saltiness—they were not from pain, but desperation. She had to keep going, had to get there in time.

"I'm here!" she yelled, spinning about desperately. "I'm here, just hold on!"

Her cry echoed from the trees, mocking her as it was returned to her ears over and over. Then she turned, hearing an answer. She felt a presence just at her left ear and detected a whisper, so quiet she could barely hear it. As she thought to turn and look, the whisper turned to a murmur, then a vast rush of sound, as though something was bearing down on her like a stampede of great beasts.

Then she turned, and the world erupted into a burst of white light and an inhuman scream.

“Aah!”

Alicia cast about, lost in the tangled mass of her hair. As she fought to catch her breath she saw she was sitting up in bed—the bed at Laurence’s house, she saw to her relief—and the noise had only been that damnable rooster yet again.

This relief evaporated immediately when she remembered the circumstances of her presence here.

Laurence? she thought, throwing herself out of bed and running to the open window with anticipation. *Has he returned yet?*

Looking out the window Alicia could see the day was a sunny one, as she had come to expect, but the air felt heavy with something ominous. *A storm is coming*, she thought, or at least the rain that Jenny had earlier declared was long overdue. Other than that, the farm was quiet. She could faintly hear Dennis’ grumblings through the open barn door, and the songbirds carried on with their winsome tunes, perhaps a little more muted than usual.

“Just relax,” she murmured to herself as she felt a hand close around her heart with nervousness. “All we can do is wait, as Mary-Anne said. He will be back before long. Just relax.”

And that is what Alicia tried to do. She found herself a comfortable seat by the window and leaned her elbow on the sill, gazing out at the dirt courtyard in front of the Gillingham house. Yet the futility of this exercise was made immediately apparent. Every fly that buzzed past, every leaf that blew in the wind, every mote of dust that glittered in the sunlight caught her eye and her breath. *Laurence!* she thought each time, and each time she deflated when she realized it had only

been her imagination.

Up and down she was blown by her changing passions, and on and on. Eventually, she glanced back at the clock only to realize she had been staring out the window for barely five minutes.

Shivering despite the warm air that flowed into her room—*Strange how this place feels so much more “my room” than in my family home in London*, she mused—she wrapped a light blanket around her shoulders and hastened out of the room with purpose.

I cannot relax, thought Alicia, setting her chin determinedly. *But neither can I stay here and simply wait, or else I shall be dead or mad before Laurence can return. Need to make the time pass, one way or another.*

* * *

“I am sure Laurence will be returning before long,” said Mary-Anne over breakfast. “Do not worry yourself.”

“That’s right, Miss Alicia. Not even Mister Gillingham’s horse can fly, but he’ll be along just as soon as he can.” Jenny, as ever, was only too happy to chime in with her assent.

“I suppose you are both right,” said Alicia with more hope than she really felt.

“Of course, whenever he does show his face, it will be not a moment too soon,” Mary-Anne said with her characteristic cheek. “Not only for your sake, you understand, but Edward anticipated my return today, and I was in the middle of packing to leave. In fact, I still think I shall take my leave in the next day or so—no reason to wait around when Laurence will surely be back momentarily.”

Alicia grunted her comprehension, then tried to focus on eating her food. As ever, it was delicious and nourishing, but it may as well have been sawdust this morning, she was so fraught with concern for her man’s welfare.

Unable to take prolonged silences, it was only a few moments before Mary-Anne spoke. “He had better have broken his leg to worry us so badly.”

“Oh, no, surely not,” said Jenny disapprovingly as she buttered another piece of bread.

“Really, though,” Mary-Anne continued with a vicious smirk. “I can only assume he got lost on the way to the city, or he surely would have passed you on the way here, Alicia. We had best find him crawling back with two broken legs, dragging that horse of his by the leg, or else he shall be in such—”

“Please, don’t say such things,” growled Alicia. “He would never worry us intentionally, and I know—”

Alicia dropped her fork on the table with a clatter as a sound echoed from the entryway. The door was being opened!

“Laurence?” Alicia called, rising from her chair eagerly.

She froze in that spot, feeling her heart race at each creak of the floorboards, then nearly collapsed where she stood when she saw the stooped form of Dennis step into the room instead.

“Sorry, Miss Ramsbury,” he said, giving her a look of pity as he stepped past her toward the kitchen. “Just coming through to get something to bring home for my poor ole mum.”

Alicia sat back down at the table, feeling her stomach retie itself into knots. She felt a warm hand rest atop hers and looked up into Jenny’s kindly eyes.

“I’m sure he’ll be back before long, Miss Alicia,” said the maid softly. “Just wait a bit longer and everything will work itself out. I just know it.”

Alicia nodded, afraid to give voice to her thoughts: *I know something is wrong.*

* * *

Noon came, inevitably, as did a second sunset. And another, and another still. The rain that Jenny had predicted came to wash over the farm, then was carried away by another shining summer day. James Barton came for a visit and was turned away in a foul temper when he learned of Laurence’s continued absence. Alicia forced herself to eat meals, go for walks, read and reread the same page of the same copy

of *Tom Jones* a hundred times or more. Still, Laurence did not return to his farm.

Where in the world could he be? Alicia asked herself with every breath, every anxious thump of her heart. From what Mary-Anne had told her it was only a day's hard ride to London...what could have happened to delay Laurence so?

"That brother of mine should know what a scandal he is causing in London society," Mary-Anne muttered some evening—either the second or third, Alicia had no way of knowing though she keenly felt every painful second of waiting. "Mary-Anne Stanhope, not having returned for the season after her sojourn to the countryside? However, will life carry on in her absence?"

Jenny just laughed and continued knitting, finally completing her warm winter hat several months after having started it. Herbert was similarly unbothered, seeming to enjoy having a brief respite from days of hurrying back and forth about the countryside, and he spent his hours sleeping peacefully in the shade.

No such peace came for Alicia, unfortunately. Every activity she attempted to undertake left her frantic, hurried, unfulfilled. On the first day, she took a basket and walked out to the orchard to harvest the last of the summer apples, only to walk back with no more than half a dozen, fearing she might miss Laurence's arrival. The same happened with every meal, every walk, every conversation or attempt to help with other farm chores: frantically wishing for the time to pass was instantly replaced with a fear of running out of time, of being caught unprepared for Laurence.

For three days she spent every second in busywork but she was plagued by the feeling that she should be doing something else. And so she spent the bulk of the fourth day solely on the one labour that

was most onerous, yet felt somehow necessary: waiting and watching.

“You know, Alicia, I just recalled my husband wrote me reminding me that my presence is expected at the Darlings’ annual garden party tomorrow,” said Mary-Anne lightly over the breakfast table on the fourth morning. “That being the case, I fear I will not be able to attend, being detained here a bit longer.”

“Oh. Yes, all right,” Alicia answered distantly. She vaguely recalled Mary-Anne saying something about leaving, but it felt so long ago that it might have been years for all she knew.

Mary-Anne leaned her head closer, trying to provoke Alicia into looking her in the eye. “Such a terrible tragedy that I shall have to miss Melinda Darling’s recitation. Last year she nearly made it through the first line of her soliloquy before her husband began snoring.”

“Yes, quite.”

“Still, I suppose they will just have to carry on their sport without my appreciation this year,” Mary-Anne continued with an impatiently theatrical sigh. “Lord knows they’ll make a mess of it without my supervision, though, somehow.”

“I see.”

“And of course, His Highness the Prince Regent will be coming round the farm for tea this evening. If His Majesty has not ordered a more pressing ball for the kingdom’s trees and ducklings, of course.” Jenny

giggled at this comment.

“Hmm,” was all Alicia could produce, her mind still occupied with listening for any signs of Laurence’s homecoming. She was shaken from this reverie by a gentle knocking on the table in front of her, produced by an even more exasperated-looking Mary-Anne.

“That was a joke, Alicia. It was meant to be funny,” Mary-Anne said, her smile now devoid of any warmth or sympathy.

“Of course it was,” snapped Alicia, her fear about Laurence channelled into anger at this distraction. “Perhaps if anyone were in need of something funny that might be helpful.”

Mary-Anne’s eyes narrowed. “And just what is that supposed to mean?”

“You just seem to do a great deal of making jokes and not very much of anything else, that’s all,” Alicia continued. Though she could hear how cruel her remark really was, it felt strangely good to release the negative thoughts and worries she had been bottling up for days, and she could not resist going further. “If you were half as good at finding solutions as you think you are at making jokes, we might not be in this situation at all.”

Mary-Anne shrugged off this accusation. “Jenny appreciates my jokes.” At this Jenny put up her hands and began clucking her disavowal of her inclusion in this spat.

“That’s because Jenny is—” Alicia stopped herself short, realizing how

hurtful she was about to be to her doting servant. She saw both women's faces contort with hurt and anger at her words, and hurriedly excused herself from the table to find somewhere more private to brood.

I need to get away from here before I say anything I shall regret.

* * *

From her vantage point in her chair by the library window, Alicia could see for nearly a mile down the road, and all the summer charms paraded by for those long, gruelling hours. Flights of birds darted and wove through the air, field hands trudged to their tasks around the farm and returned hours later. The breeze carried flights of pollen through the sky. Sunlight was transfigured from brilliant white to butter-yellow to, at last, a rusty orange before the world was shrouded in quiet darkness.

Alicia watched it all pass her by as her eyes were fixed on the farthest point on the road. Sometimes she stared hard enough that she had to blink away a mote of dust, and opened her eyes frantically once more, praying she had not missed Laurence's appearance. She never did.

What in heaven's name could have happened to delay him so? Alicia thought as she struggled not to rake her fingernails across her face in grief and fear. Her mind readily provided a hundred answers to this question, each more monstrous than the last. His horse had thrown him, and he was lying dead in a ditch in some lost byway. He had been ambushed by wild beasts, or robbed and murdered by highwaymen, or...

A short, barking laugh escaped from Alicia's mouth as she realized

“Come now, you’ve learned better than that,” she chastised herself. She had not thought of the countryside as a dangerous place since before she had arrived in Dunwood. Now the thoughts that had harried her dreams all those long days ago seemed ridiculous, like fears that belonged to another woman entirely.

But then, inevitably, darker thoughts still began to creep into the corners of her mind. *If he did reach the house*, she thought, her hands trembling, *then Grace may equally have refused to see him or told him hideous lies. And if the latter, then there it is certain she has done her very worst.*

Alicia’s mind swam with all the possibilities of how Grace might choose to hurt her after what Alicia had done. *Even worse, she might have done some harm to Laurence!* she thought, fighting to keep breathing. *For all I know she may have him chained up in a cupboard, or...or sent to jail for some perceived slight. I need to*

Clink!

Alicia nearly fell out of her chair, so startled was she by the sound of glass hitting wood beside her elbow.

“There is something I need your help with,” said Mary-Anne, looking down at her friend by the window.

“What is it?” Alicia asked before thinking.

“I need you to tell me if last year’s cider is still any good.” She held up a corked brown bottle and two empty glasses. “This is one of the last

bottles, and I want to be able to tell Laurence if the remaining bottles are worth drinking or not before he starts over with this year's apples."

"I...apologize for my words earlier. But I'm afraid I am not really in the mood, Mary-Anne," said Alicia sourly as she turned back to her window.

"Well *I* am." Mary-Anne reached over and pulled the drapes closed, obscuring the view of the outside, and sat down heavily in a chair facing Alicia.

"I beg your pardon!" she protested.

Deftly Mary-Anne uncorked the bottle and poured two large glasses of pale yellow cider. "In case you have forgotten, Laurence is my brother," she said as the liquid bubbled happily into the cups. "And while I don't like to make this commonly known, I am not very good at sitting still when there's something bothering me. I tend to fret when there's a problem I cannot overcome through sheer force of will, and then I grow even more difficult to be around than usual."

She re-corked the bottle, then passed a glass to Alicia and fixed her with a meaningful look. "Now, you don't have to drink. You don't even have to say anything. But if you still care to earn your keep, you'd do well to sit there and help me not fret."

Alicia felt a crush of thoughts at the periphery of her mind. She had so much to worry about, so much to be ready for, so many foul possibilities to consider. She opened her mouth to turn Mary-Anne away...but then she saw the vulnerability in the other woman's eyes.

I have been quite rude to her when she has just been trying to help in her own way, thought Alicia amid a rush of guilt. And now she approaches me for help. The least I can do is listen.

From the moment she picked up her glass and tasted the cider, light and sweet and dangerously potent, Alicia was swept up in conversation with Mary-Anne. For the first time since leaving this place, Alicia felt the time pass quickly and pleasurably as they discussed the best and worst of London society, as well as matters that felt much dearer to both their hearts: Laurence, life in the country, plans for the future. Tears of laughter were wiped away with one hand as the other reached out for a consoling touch. The shadows moved across the room, candles were relit, feet put up on footstools.

“There is one thing I’d like you to explain to me, Alicia,” said Mary-Anne at some late hour.

“If it’s anything to do with matters of men, leave me out of it!” Alicia laughed, finishing the dregs of her glass. “I clearly have no head for them.”

“More the matter of one man.” Mary-Anne’s eyes glittered with mirth. “How is it that while you and my brother are evidently two of the most intelligent people I know...”

“Being an excellent judge of intelligence, yourself.”

“Hush. Explain to me how it is that for all your mutual brains, both of you are utterly oblivious to how remarkable your feelings are for one another? The way you look at one another is downright disgusting in

its naiveté.”

“No!” Alicia protested, laughing.

“It’s as plain as the nose on your face, Alicia. Or possibly the nose on my face,” she said, tapping a finger on the slight bend in own her aristocratic nose. “The way you keep looking at him when you think he’s not paying attention, the way your eyes light up when he speaks to you...it’s bloody obvious just how he makes you feel. As if nothing else in the world matters. Like as cruel as this life is, it can all be truly wonderful as long as you’re in his presence. There really is nothing like it.”

The room lapsed into a warm, thoughtful silence as Mary-Anne poured the last of the bottle into her own glass. “Has...has any man ever made *you* feel like that, Mary-Anne?” Alicia asked, stifling a hiccup.

“No,” she answered brusquely. “But I’ve seen it before, from time to time, both here in the country and in London. It’s as powerful a condition as it is incurable by any means known to man. Or woman, more importantly.”

“I had no idea it was such a rare thing,” said Alicia quietly. “Not really, anyway. I only know that the way I feel for him is like nothing else I have ever experienced in my life. The idea that I could spend the rest of my life in his company is just so...self-evidently wonderful.”

She felt Mary-Anne’s hand reach out and brush against hers in a friendly embrace. “He feels the same way for you. Damn my own meddling, I was hoping to spare both your feelings, but I knew there would be no dissuading Laurence. Not from the gentility of letting you go back to your life, and certainly not from the bravado of running

after you. When he does get back, Lord help anyone who gets in the way of you two.”

Alicia smiled fondly. “Perhaps you might get your wish of a new sister-in-law after all, then. I know I could certainly use another s—”

She stopped mid-sentence. *It’s thunder on the horizon. It’s Dennis closing up the barn for the night. It’s my own heartbeat.*

But no, she realized with a swell of hope—it was hoof beats she was hearing. Loud ones, drawing closer. And looking to Mary-Anne, she saw the same hope shining in the other woman’s eyes. As one they threw open the drapes and saw a silhouette approach the dim outline of the barn and throw open the door.

In the pale light of the waning moon, Alicia saw the barest glimpse of his face...but that was more than enough. She had seen that same face every second since leaving this farm days before.

Laurence has returned!

Chapter 21

No True Gentleman

If Alicia spent the previous days sleepwalking, now she felt as though she had been plunged into a barrel of cold water. Mary-Anne suggested she go ahead and speak with Laurence first, and Alicia had not even offered token resistance to this suggestion.

Her bare feet flew down the stairs, sure and true, and for the first time since she could remember her mind was empty. Empty of imaginings, of what-ifs and worst-case scenarios—empty even of expectation of what awaited her just a few feet away. All she felt in her mind was the wordless drive that carried her out the door, across the yard, and toward the open barn door.

Barely taking a breath in her short run across the farmyard, Alicia gasped as she stepped across the threshold into the dim barn. She could hardly believe it, but there was Laurence, right in front of her, looking up at her with eyes that were wide and full of tears as he stopped in the middle of pulling the saddle off poor beleaguered Robinson. The pale orange light of a lantern flickered across the straw-covered floor, the clouds of dust kicked up by the horse giving this familiar setting the glint of the faerie kingdom. In truth, Alicia felt as she looked upon this man she had not seen in nearly a week, the unearthly glow suited him, and she felt herself falling in love with him all over again in a single heartbeat.

“Alicia?” asked Laurence. And with that one word, she felt her newfound resolve dissipate once more, and she dissolved into a cloud of tears as she flung herself into his arms.

“Oh, Laurence!” she cried, wrapping her arms around his solid frame. All the desperation she had bottled up inside her, all the despair at never getting to see him again was released in a storm of tears as she pressed herself against his strong chest.

Though she did not feel him move in response, words came out of Alicia like a torrent—somehow she was fearful that if she left them unsaid, he would vanish once more before she got the chance to say them. “I love you, Laurence,” Alicia spoke through her tears. “I never wanted to leave here. I want to stay by your side for my entire life.”

Through the haze of tears, she heard herself continue to talk there on the dusty floor of the barn. She told him all about how she arrived home in London and immediately realized she could not bear to be apart from him. About how she had raced back to Dunwood the very next day only to find him missing and how she and Mary-Anne had been so worried, but now that he was back everything would be all right, forever and always. Eventually, her words were reduced to stark, wordless sobs of emotion that echoed from the rafters and hushed the usual animal hubbub of the Gillingham barn.

Then, all in a rush, she felt a chill run down her spine. *Something is wrong*, she thought as the hairs on the back of her neck stood on end. Laurence’s arms were still stiffly at his sides, his posture straight and muscles clenched beneath his thin white shirt. He spoke not a word.

She released him, stepping back to see a strange, wary look in his eyes, as though she had knifed him in the stomach rather than bared her soul to him.

“What’s wrong?” asked Alicia, suddenly shot through with fear. “Laurence, what is it?”

“Alicia, what...” For the first time since Alicia had met him, Laurence looked positively unwell. His eyes were wide, chin shaking as he stammered, “What...are you doing here?”

“I...Laurence, I came back here for *you*,” said Alicia, her hands resting atop her heart as though to ensure it would continue to beat. She blinked, unable to fathom why he was reacting in such a way.

Setting the lantern carefully on the floor, Laurence stepped away and began pacing the floor, running a hand through his hair and fighting to draw a deep breath. *The man looks as though he has been visited by a spectre rather than the woman he loves*, thought Alicia blankly.

“I went to London after you,” said Laurence in a lost, forlorn voice, as if speaking from the bottom of a well. “I rode with the morning light the very next day.”

“I know!” Alicia interjected, nodding enthusiastically. “Mary-Anne told me that—”

Her words died on her tongue as she saw the look Laurence shot her now. He had never looked at her like this before, but the meaning was unmistakable. And so Alicia held her tongue, fighting the tears from flooding her eyes as she watched Laurence continue to pace.

“When at last I found your home, I went inside and spoke with your sister.” Laurence shook his head, his lip curling bitterly. “She told me you were there, but you would not see me.”

“No,” Alicia mouthed, afraid to give voice to her denial lest she upset him further.

The dancing shadows of the lantern cast a ghastly yellow mask over Laurence’s features. With his eyes wide and haunted, he continued, “She told me you were looking forward to forgetting all about what had happened, to getting back to your normal life. She told me you were entertaining marriage proposals from gentlemen in London, from a...a Mister Woodruff, most recently. She told me you do this kind of thing all the time, that you ‘play at love’ with men you have no intention of being with.”

Then Laurence stopped and raked his hand against his cheek in grief. “And do you know what else? She told me someone like me would never, ever be acceptable for a woman of your standing. As I should have known all along, I suppose, had I not been too ignorant and uncivilized to think of it.”

He stopped there, his breath catching in his throat. Alicia could see that whatever wounds had been left in him days before were now reopened painfully before her, and as she unconsciously stepped forward to offer him a comforting embrace, Laurence’s arm shot out to stop her.

Grace! she thought, teeth gritted hard enough to hurt. *What have you done?*

“And so I...I left.” Laurence’s shoulders slumped at this, as though bearing a great weight atop them.

He began pacing once more, ignoring the nervous whinny he

provoked from one of the horses. “I did not know what to do. So I wandered. I rode, and when Robinson could not carry me any longer, I walked. For hours and hours, I walked. Sometimes I slept under a tree or in a ditch, and when I woke I walked again. I did not know where I was going—all that I knew was that I did not need to be much of anywhere, and that the thought of returning to where I had fallen in love with you was something I could not bear. I thought as long as I walked I would not need to think about how horrible I felt.”

Then Laurence shot her a betrayed look, one that Alicia felt herself wither under. “I would have fought for you, Alicia,” he said between clenched teeth. “I went to that terrible city to do just that. But I cannot fight *you*. And to think that what we shared, what I felt for you was...just a game?”

At this accusation, Alicia felt her indignation boil over into a fuming rage. “Oh, that horrible sister of mine!” she whispered. “If I ever see her again...”

But just as her fist clenched in anger once more, Alicia felt a strange calm come over her. “Laurence,” she said in an even tone. She waited for him to look up at her before continuing, and fixed her stare right at his red, watery eyes. “I do not know why, but Grace lied to you.”

He uttered a sound of exasperated disbelief, rolling his eyes, but Alicia persisted. “She lied, Laurence. About all of it. You can see for yourself, can’t you? She told you I was still in London, after all, but I have been here nearly five days waiting for you. Mary-Anne, Dennis, James...ask anyone, they will tell you.”

Alicia could see his mind racing. His eyes darted about the barn, as though he was trying to collect several thoughts and piece them together into some semblance of truth.

“Why...why would she lie like that?” Laurence asked at last.

“I cannot say,” said Alicia with a helpless shrug. “I have always known her to do this, though. Ever since we were children, the truth has always been anathema to Grace if she could gain any advantage by making up a story. Or even just to deprive another of an advantage she envied.”

“But you are her own sister! She would make up such cruelties just to serve her own selfish whims?”

Now Alicia felt her cheeks spread in a wide, eager smile. “It doesn’t matter anymore, Laurence. Grace can spin her own stories to her heart’s content.” She stepped closer to Laurence, aching to press her body against his, to feel him wrap her up in his strong, thick arms. “Now I am here, and so are you. Nothing else matters. We can let our love bloom in its own time for the rest of our lives together.”

But Laurence once again rebuffed her advances, staggering to an upturned wooden crate and sitting heavily on it. His face was cast in shadow, but Alicia could see he was now crying in earnest. “No. No, don’t you see?” he asked, a tear running down his rugged cheek, a defeated look in his eyes. “Grace is right. Whatever else she may be, your sister is not wrong in this case.”

Alicia drew herself back, suppressing a shudder as she did so. “What do you mean?”

“Alicia, I *am* wrong for you!” Laurence blurted. With that he dropped his head between his hands, his body seeming to shrink as he was

crushed by the enormity of the tragedy before them. “You and I...we come from different worlds. And as much as I care for you, I cannot ask you to throw away your life out here in the country. You could have so much more than I could ever give you—you could marry any man in London, could live in the most opulent house in the land and have a noble title. Your children could be little barons or dukes or...or something!”

He paused, choking back another sob as he raised his head and set his chin in defiance. “Go back to London, Alicia. There is no noble marriage for you here, no elegant balls, or wealth to keep you in comfort. All you will ever find here is a plot of land and a dilapidated old house that smells of manure. Staying here would mean ruination of your family, your reputation...everything that really matters.”

“Laurence, I—”

Laurence cut her off as he stood abruptly, his muscles tensing as he wiped away an errant tear and crossed his burly arms. “If you ever loved me, Alicia, then do as I say, this once. Go back inside to your room. At first light, you can go back to London and set your life back on its proper track.”

She weighed his words in her mind, trying to consider their implications. Yet as reasonable as everything he brought up would seem to be, Alicia felt each of his objections waft away in the cool night breeze. All that lingered in her mind was an appreciation for how, even at this most miserable moment, Laurence was the comeliest man she had ever laid eyes upon.

And he will be mine, and I his, she thought with growing satisfaction.

Still unsure from where she was conjuring this confidence, Alicia stepped forward and rested a hand on Laurence's tear-stained cheek. He flinched, then looked down at her, the light of the lantern dancing in his pure blue eyes.

"I will do as you say, Laurence," she said coolly. "But not until you hear what I have to say." Laurence regarded her cagily, then nodded, his eyes not leaving hers.

"I may have told you that my parents left me a sizable inheritance to serve as my dowry," said Alicia, her fingers still brushing admiringly against the man's cheek. "What I may not have made clear, through modesty or shame, was just how sizable that dowry truly is. It is a fortune, Laurence, far more money than I could spend on my own comfort even if I tried."

With a scowl, Laurence began to object, "That isn't what—"

But Alicia cut him off with a stern tap of her finger. "I listened to you. Now you must listen to me." She waited for him to nod once again before she continued.

"I loathe opera. And balls, and parties. They are the absolutely dulllest way a person can spend their time, I find." This provoked the barest hint of a smile on Laurence's face. "I cannot bear the thought of living in the same city as my sister, and I have no other living family. I have never met a 'London gentleman' who has been anything other than a rank bore. And Mister Woodruff is the most boring of them all!"

Spurred on by the smirk Laurence was fighting to keep from his lips, Alicia stepped closer still and poked him with a finger right in his brawny chest. "Most of all, my 'reputation' is something that does not

bother me in the slightest. As far as I am concerned, reputation is a thing that only concerns people in London about whom I do not care in the least. I cannot eat my reputation, Laurence—it does not bring me happiness. Only you do that. Only you have *ever* done that.”

Alicia looked up into Laurence’s eyes, which now softened with her every word. “You see, Mister Gillingham, despite your best efforts to be a gentleman, there is in fact no reason in the world why I should not marry you. You should know better than anyone that I had never given a single thought to what I wanted until I came to this farm. And now there is not a single doubt in my mind—I want you. I want to be here, with you, right here in Dunwood, until the end of my days. I want to live a quiet life taking care of the animals at your side, learning about the beauty that has been right here under my nose all my life. I want to marry you and have children with you and grow old and cantankerous with you.”

Laurence gave her a smile of hope and straightened his broad shoulders.

“Now,” Alicia said, feeling tears begin to spring up from some deep part of her. “If you still want me to leave, I will abide by your wishes. But if—”

But whatever she was going to say vanished with the smoke from the lantern as Laurence did what she had hoped he would all along and smothered her words with a deep, passionate kiss.

Chapter 22

A Union Most Blessed

Alicia pulled the curtain aside with one finger, sneaking a glimpse of the assembled masses on the Dunwood village green. Swallowing, she felt the anticipation that had plagued her for days become overwhelmed by a different sensation altogether: a strange feeling that she had been here before.

It came to her after only a moment, and Alicia let the curtain fall flat as she plunged into memory. She was nine years old. Her parents were still alive. She and Grace were behind a curtain at Missus Miggins' grand Portsmouth estate, and the two girls were expected to show off their talents for the assembled adults.

Alicia smiled, remembering how diligently she had practised the lines of the poem she had memorized, and how those lines had nearly evaporated from her brain the second she peeked out from behind the curtain at all those expectant faces. Now, taking another look at the happy crowd just outside the little village church, she felt the same sense of exhilarated fear.

Except this time, I will not be out there in front of everyone on my own, Alicia thought. *This time it will be Laurence and I together, for the first time and for all time after this.*

She glanced at the old wooden clock on the wall of the vestry. *If he is not late, that is.* Alicia had spent the morning furiously preparing herself for her wedding day. Now that Jenny and Mary-Anne had finished helping her primp and dress herself for the “modest affair,” as

Laurence kept calling it, all she had to do was wait to be collected by Laurence and the ceremony could begin.

She looked out over the crowd a little more carefully, hoping they would not catch her staring from her window. A few faces she recognized and grinned as she took in the picture of them in their finest attire: Mary-Anne in a fashionable turquoise gown, James Barton in a dapper suit, Dennis in a slightly more moth-eaten one, Jenny wearing her usual black dress—though without her knitting for once, Alicia noted happily. She even caught sight of Missus Miggins and her companion chatting amiably with Margaret, and for a moment wished she could take part in the conversation.

There were far more faces she did not recognize, though from their familiar tall noses and high cheekbones she assumed they must belong to the “pack of cousins” Laurence told her would be in attendance. All were laughing, playing, or conversing merrily in the late summer sunshine, rambling beside the stream that ran through the town or sitting beneath the shady arms of a massive wych elm with the barest hint of yellow beginning to appear at the corners of its leaves.

Laurence thought it might not be proper for us to be wed outside, beautiful as it is, she mused, smiling. Thank goodness Mary-Anne talked sense into him. If I'd wanted to be shut away in a drafty old building like this church, we may as well have stayed in London!

Of course, there was one face that she could not see out in the yard—the one she had really been looking for. Alicia was not sure whether she was relieved or disappointed, but when she caught her fingers unconsciously worrying at a thread on her splendid blue wedding gown, the truth seemed relatively obvious.

She shot a glance at the old wooden clock on the wall. Laurence was now fifteen minutes late. *Whatever could be keeping the man?* Alicia

wondered. For the briefest of instants, she remembered how terrible the waiting had been for him those long days after returning from London...but then she sighed blissfully at the memory of the days that followed that.

The days of planning their wedding and lazing by the stream in the summer heat, of learning the names of a panoply of new flowers and fruits and birds that arose into the world in the late summer. And the nights, deliciously sensual in their tenderness, all the more fervent and tempestuous that they knew they need wait only a little longer until... until...

Alicia blew out a puff of air, wiping a trickle of sweat from her brow. *No more of those thoughts now*, she chastised herself. *You do not want to walk out to your wedding with flushed cheeks and a racing pulse.*

To distract herself, she examined herself once more in the small mirror Father Hamlin had graciously left for her to prepare for the ceremony. Her brown hair was arranged in a complicated tangle of curls atop her head, and her dress was a simple but beautiful affair in turquoise silk—she had ordered it special-made using the last of her allowance, and it had arrived just yesterday.

Alicia frowned and ran her hands over the garment once more, noting how it hugged her waist a bit tightly. Then again, as Mary-Anne had pointed out, that bit of discomfort did draw the eye nicely to her bare arms and décolletage, both of which were beautifully flushed with colour after the weeks she had spent gambolling in the summer sun with Laurence.

For a moment she idly wondered if what she wore would be perceived as appropriate by the townspeople in attendance. But this thought was quickly discarded. *I only hope Laurence likes the way I look*, she thought, licking her lips anxiously. *That's what matters.*

A sound came at the door. *It's time!* she thought, reminding herself to continue breathing. Alicia picked up the bouquet of summer roses so hastily she nearly cut herself on the thorns and spun about to greet her groom and commence with the ceremony of their joining.

...And she nearly dropped the bouquet once more when her eyes fell not on her handsome husband-to-be, but on a slender brunette woman in a bizarre maroon dress.

“Grace!”

“Hello, Alicia,” said Grace in a subdued tone.

For a long while nothing was said. The two sisters stared at one another for several moments, then their eyes darted about the room furtively only to inspect one another's bearing, dress, posture. Grace crossed and uncrossed her arms as Alicia felt her hands try once again to pull at that dratted thread in her dress.

“I...see my invitation arrived, then,” Alicia said at last.

“Yes. Yes, the other day.”

As she carefully studied her sister's reaction, Alicia saw Grace's eye float about the church vestry, resting momentarily on this detail or that. *Probably looking for things to find fault with*, Alicia could not help but think. *Too shabby, too country, too ostentatious, or not ostentatious*

enough. Then again, knowing Grace, she probably has not spared a single thought for anything around her, as none of it concerns her.

Then Alicia shook her head, sending this judgment out of her mind with great force of will. *You will only perpetuate this fight if you keep thinking about her like that, Alicia. Let her be as awful as she likes, and respond accordingly, but do not condemn her before she says a word.*

Alicia was only too happy to have this latter determination confirmed as Grace finally looked directly at her with a sickly smile. “Well,” said Grace after another long pause. “It’s...nice. Your dress, I mean. Simple. Plain, perhaps. But, ah...that suits you, doesn’t it?”

That is as close to a compliment as I have heard Grace pay anyone in... well, ever! Alicia breathed, finding herself smiling in wonderment. *Perhaps there is yet room for miracles in this world of ours after all.*

“Of course,” Grace continued without hesitation, “when Mister Cavendish and I marry it will be in a much grander location. We are to marry, you know—he would have asked me much sooner, but I put him off for the sake of propriety. Still, now that we are promised, I imagine the cathedral will do for our own ceremony, if it is available. As befits the elder sister, wouldn’t you say?”

Ah. So my sister has not disappeared entirely.

“That’s wonderful to hear, Grace,” said Alicia, stepping closer to her sister. “Congratulations. I am sure you and Mister...Cavendish, is it? I am sure you will be very happy.”

Grace pursed her lips as though she had taken a bite of a lemon. *As much as she has always craved it, she has never known how to take it when someone is nice to her*, Alicia thought with a sad smile.

“Well,” Grace said again, raising her arms listlessly. “I suppose this is it, then. Even if the circumstances are most irregular—some might say scandalous, though of course, I would not pay attention to such things—now you will be a married woman. I know Mother and Father would be pleased that you will be taken care of for the future.”

Alicia reached out her hands, and Grace only looked to them in confusion for a few seconds before she took them in her own, squeezing gently.

“Thank you, Grace,” she said, surprised by how genuinely touched she felt at this gesture. “And with you having won the hand of your man, it looks as though we will both be all right, after all.”

The door hinge squeaked once more. Alicia squeezed Grace’s hands tightly with anticipation as she looked expectantly at the opening door.

It’s time.

* * *

The Gillingham house was the same as it had been for the previous several weeks. Yet somehow, ineffably, everything had changed completely. Night had long since fallen, yet even as the new Mister and Missus gave their vows and shared laughter and tears with

attendees late into the evening, someone had snuck back to the old farmhouse and lit a constellation of candles between the front door and the upstairs, and somehow found time to sprinkle fresh rose petals along this glittering path.

But even more than that, everything *felt* different. Alicia had crossed the threshold into this house dozens of times, had fondly looked on its wooden rafters and modest decorations more times than she could count...but now, after a few words were said before Father Hamlin, the air smelled sweeter, the lights glowed brighter, the corners of the house more full of life and love.

“Perhaps it is simply a matter of perspective, so to speak,” said Laurence when Alicia voiced this observation. To call attention to his joke, he bounced Alicia up and down in his grasp.

“Stop that!” she giggled, clutching his neck all the tighter.

“Only a little farther, Missus Gillingham,” he said in his deep, wonderful baritone. Now Alicia’s eyes stopped examining their home—*her* home, she remembered with a swoon—and instead turned to drink in her husband’s glorious visage.

Laurence was as fetching as she had ever seen him standing at the altar in his fine black suit, but it was still that rugged, masculine face that made her feel weak in the knees. Seeing his shining blue eyes look down at her with a smile, Alicia felt a surge of happiness greater than even what she had felt that afternoon.

“I have the rest of my life to look upon this beautiful face,” Laurence said, pausing halfway up the stairs to meet her stare with stars in his eyes. Alicia reached a hand up to caress his cheek admiringly. “Yet I

feel I just cannot look at you enough, Alicia.”

“Perhaps we should stay here a while longer, then,” she cooed.

Laurence chuckled at this, then resumed carrying her up to the upper floor of the house. “Tempting though that may be, I’d rather not risk my arms giving out and spoiling this wonderful moment.” Alicia rewarded him for this insolence with another gleeful kick of her legs.

Before she knew it, Laurence had carried her through the door at the end of the hallway, the one she had glimpsed during her visits but never dared to open. And now, pushing it open with his hip, she found herself in a wide, elegant room lit by a hundred candles.

“Oh, Laurence!” said Alicia, her voice full of wonder. Wordlessly he set her down on her feet and she examined their surroundings. Jenny had been here, clearly, judging by how Alicia could see her things were unpacked and her empty bags resting against one of the massive wooden chests of drawers.

And as quaint as the artworks that bedecked the walls in the rest of the house might be, Laurence clearly saved the most appealing paintings for his own room. Most of all she noticed the bed, a grand feathery thing with a carved wooden headboard. Alicia walked closer to it, her mind racing with the possibilities it suggested.

Her heart fluttered as she heard the door close softly behind her. She turned to see Laurence—sweet, handsome Laurence—looking at her with a most becoming blush on his cheeks.

“Well,” he said, shifting his weight from one foot to the other. “Here we are. Our wedding night.”

“I think you may be right,” said Alicia with a meekness that surprised her.

For an instant, all they could do was look on one another hungrily. Alicia could not begin to guess just what was running through Laurence’s mind, but if it was anything like her own, it was tied up in knots, thinking of a thousand thrilling things to do all at the same time. The two shared a laugh at their shared paralysis.

“I...have not...been with a woman before,” said Laurence, stepping closer to her, close enough that all his musky masculine smell was caught up in her ragged breathing.

“Nor I with a man,” Alicia answered with a smile. “We shall simply have to do what comes naturally.”

This proved to be the proper course. In a great collision of flesh and desire the two set upon one another. Laurence’s hands felt they were everywhere at once even as they held Alicia firmly in their grasp—lovingly stroking her neck, holding her pert derrière, touching her along her wide hips. Each part of her that he touched awakened a new flow of desire from the sluices that had opened within her, and all the while his lips never left hers as their tongues sought and probed against one another with great ferocity.

“Oh,” Alicia grunted, feeling Laurence’s lips embrace her along the tops of her shoulder blades, nudging the neckline of her gown aside lustily. “Oh, that *oh*—”

Her thoughts became simpler, wordless, animal. Nothing existed any longer but her body and Laurence's. Somehow their clothes disappeared, piece by piece, until Alicia found herself wholly naked and lying on the bed.

She had scarcely registered that Laurence too was unclothed, the full glory of his manhood on unashamed display before her, when she felt her legs part, her womanhood possessed of a needy emptiness she had never felt before.

Laurence took her invitation with great readiness and fell upon her with a force and power that was frightening in its fierceness. Alicia's hands flew about his body, delighting as she explored each fascinating difference, each hard angle and strong, rigid point of his form.

"Yes," Alicia said in a flash of awareness, feeling his manhood pulse significantly at her touch. Laurence's hand crept up her thigh, higher, still higher, until it reached some unknown place that sent waves of electric pleasure shooting through Alicia's frame. "Yes, Laurence, yes!" she gasped.

With awesome force he spread open her legs as he sought her feminine mound, and Alicia took him inside her with a rush of elation that took her breath away. The two moved their bodies together in a crazed dance, her fingers clutching the sheets as his massive male form stoked the fire that burned inside her higher and higher still.

Each instant felt like an age as Alicia felt sensations she had never dreamed of. Her every cell had become an organ of pleasure as they carried on their dance, on and on and back and forth and higher and hotter and more until she thought she could bear the euphoria no longer.

And then...

As the two of them reached the summit of their mutual ecstasy as one, Alicia felt pouring over them a vast ocean of glorious sensation. She felt the sounds that emanated from deep within her body echoed in Laurence's own voice, as their desire mixed in a divine chorus. Everything in the world seemed to wash away as Alicia and Laurence disappeared beneath waves of exultation, their bodies holding one another tightly in the single celestial form they had become for an instant.

Then, as the wave at last crested and passed them by, Alicia felt them both collapse against the soft feather bed, floating together on their sea of love.

"I love you, Alicia," Laurence panted. Alicia could not summon anything more than a pleased moan, but by his touch, as she pressed herself against him she knew he understood.

Alicia rested her head against her husband's chest and felt their hearts beat together as one. As their heavy, satisfied breathing echoed from the rafters above, Alicia felt herself drift away on a cloud of bliss, surrendering to the most serene and perfect sleep she had ever known.

THE END

Can't get enough of Alicia and Laurence? Then make sure to check out the

Extended Epilogue to find out...

Will Laurence finally overpass his doubts about Alicia's high social status?

Or will their journey back to London reignite troubling old thoughts?

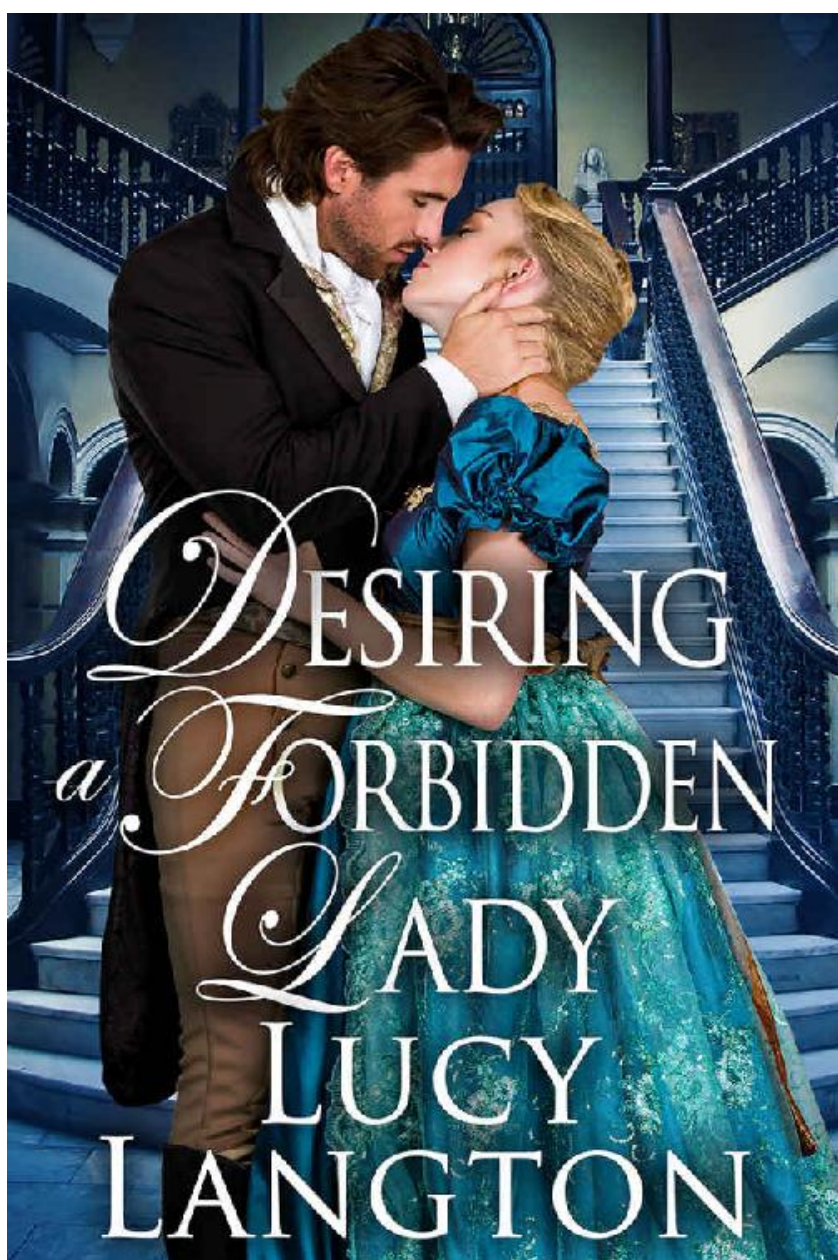
*What kind of inappropriate thoughts will Lawrence share with Alicia in the
back of their carriage on their way to London?*

*How will the couple react when memories from the past start springing
from everywhere during their journey?*

Click the link or enter it into your browser

<http://lucylangton.com/alicia>

*(After reading the Extended Epilogue, turn the page to read the first
chapters from “**Desiring a Forbidden Lady**”, my Amazon Best-Selling
novel!)*



DESIRING
a FORBIDDEN
LADY
LUCY
LANGTON

Desiring a Forbidden Lady

Introduction

The alluring Harmony Chance has been excitedly looking forward to her first Season in Town with her aunt, uncle and cousin Margret. Her cousin on the other hand, doesn't share the enthusiasm about entering high society, as she feels devastated about her arranged marriage. To Harmony's surprise, the source of her cousin's tragedy is the most seductive man she has ever seen. To make things even more complicated, he also seems to be enchanted by her and soon, his scorching kisses set her heart on fire. The more time she spends with the beguiling Daniel, the more she finds herself wondering... Why does a man who is completely wrong for her, make everything feel so right in his arms?

Lord Daniel Mavis has been trying to commit to the promise his father made to Lord Chance, that he would marry his daughter Margret, when she came of age. However, after realizing that Margret is someone he could never love or desire, he is struggling to honour a promise that precedes his existence. As if this wasn't enough, he becomes completely captivated by Margret's enticing cousin, Miss Harmony Chance. To Daniel, she is the most tempting woman he has ever laid his eyes upon and she is quite witty as well. However, when the Earl of Flanagan takes a serious interest in Harmony and tries to conquer her heart, Daniel will have to make a difficult decision. Is he willing to fight for the woman he is passionately falling in love with,

or will maintaining his good reputation mean more to him?

The more Harmony and Daniel fall for each other, the more Daniel tries to push her away and fulfil his family duty by accepting a loveless future. Soon, they will have to choose paths that will dramatically change their lives. Caught between an arranged marriage and a wicked antagonist lord, will they choose to risk it all for a lust too overwhelming to resist? Or will this undeniable passion be buried once and for all?

Chapter 1

Lord Daniel Mavis, Earl of Prescott, walked the empty halls of his manor in the countryside as he made his way to the study. It was another beautiful spring day as morning sunlight poured in through the many open windows of the large estate.

He'd requested the windows to be open to let in as much as fresh air as the days continued to grow warm. The mixture of the fresh scent of spring and the solution that was used to polish the wooden floors was a pleasing smell to Daniel as he walked through his manor to the desired room.

Prescott Manor had been in his family's care for over three generations. As the sole heir to the manor and title of Earl, Daniel had gone to great lengths to ensure that the estate remained in its best condition. The wooden floors throughout the house were cleaned and polished regularly, even though he hardly had guests in the countryside. He knew that most of society had changed floors from wooden to marble to reflect French influence on the country despite the war. However, Daniel was determined to keep things the way they were at his manor and not allow changing influences to affect his childhood home.

Portraits lined the hallways of past family members and landscapes of Prescott. They were like old friends greeting him as Daniel made his way through the house. The paintings were the same from when he was young, the frames polished and the portraits dusted on a regular basis, as per his request. The curtains in the rooms, most particularly the drawing and sitting rooms, were taken down once a month and scrubbed even though he rarely smoked his pipe and guests to Prescott Manor were few and far between.

As Daniel finally reached the study at the end of the long main hallway, he entered a space he could easily picture his father in. Though his parents had both passed five years ago, he felt their memories still close to him. Countless times he'd found his father in the study, mulling over papers of business and always willing to teach Daniel the management of the Earldom.

Daniel paused at the doorway to the study and smirked, thinking of all the times he'd sat beside his father and reviewed papers and letters from the tenants. His father had always wanted to make sure all was well within their lands.

Now, Daniel positioned himself beyond the mahogany desk that was inlaid with green velvet. On top of the desk was a stack of letters he needed to reply to, and a good man still to open. He knew he could have left all manners of business to his trusted steward, but found that being more hands on with his enterprises kept him focused and out of trouble, unlike other Earls his age of twenty and eight years. Daniel didn't travel to town except for matters of business, or to attend social gatherings to keep up appearances with the Ton. He stayed away from gambling halls and all matters of temptation.

The study was lined with bookshelves of ledgers that he could refer to in order to discover trends through the years. All the history of Prescott Manor was kept in the study for quick access. He felt his father had prepared him well for the position of Earl, to include what his future would hold for him. Daniel sighed as he glanced at the letters, knowing that not all of them were letters of business. He also had quite a lot of letters from the Chance family and the upcoming Season in Town.

Daniel's late father had been a close friend of Lord Philip Chance, Earl of Bentley. Lord Chance's estate was riding distance from Prescott, and Daniel used to frequent the estate when his father was alive. It was when he had reached manhood that his father had confessed to him that Margret Chance, Lord Chance's daughter, was his intended. That

their marriage had been planned in his infancy. Having a great sense of honor, Daniel hadn't argued or put up a fuss. He knew it was the tradition of families of wealth and thought that marrying the daughter of an Earl was a reasonable choice.

However, now that the time drew near for their wedding, their engagement already being announced in the papers, Daniel had a strange feeling of dread every time he thought of Margret Chance gracing the halls of his manor each day. Though a beautiful woman with hair the color of roasted chestnuts and matching depths of brown in her eyes that could entice any young man, Daniel knew much of the young woman's character over the years.

Daniel knew the young lady was a materialistic woman who enjoyed the finer things in life. Granted, her father could easily afford such luxuries and her mother was very encouraging of such an outlook on life. Daniel would describe Margret as very fashion forward and always looking to impress those gathered in a room. She was skilled at the pianoforte, which was a common indulgence of young unmarried women to serenade a prospective suitor.

Though Daniel would honor his family and his father's dying wish that he marry Margret, he found no pleasure in it. He figured Prescott Manor was big enough for the two of them to be married but live their own separate lives. Perhaps at some point Daniel would be able to love Margret, no doubt when she started to birth their children.

He even wondered if married life would make Margret more attractive to him in the sense that her silly ideologies would fade away and she would become easier to love when she wasn't so focused on the style of her gown or the way her hair had been done that day. More than anything, he hoped she wouldn't become such a gossip like he knew Lady Chance was.

“Morning, my Lord,” greeted Mr. Luke, the butler for Prescott Manor. He brought in a breakfast tray and set it on the edge of the large mahogany desk before bowing his head.

“Good morning, Mr. Luke. How does the day fare for you?” Daniel asked as he pushed the matter of his upcoming wedding out of his mind and pulled the tray forward. He lifted the silver lid off the porcelain plate and set it aside to reveal a wonderful assortment of breakfast sausages, poached eggs, and buttered toast. As he waited for his food to cool, he poured himself a cup of black tea and added a bit of fresh cream.

“The day is well, thank you. Johnathan is packing your trunks as we speak for your upcoming trip to Town. The carriage will be ready for you by mid-afternoon to start your travels,” Mr. Luke explained. “The majority of the staff has left this morning for Town to prepare the townhouse for your arrival.”

Daniel nodded before taking a sip of tea, appreciating the morning reports. “Thank you, Mr. Luke. See to it that all further posts are rerouted to my townhouse. I filed the update with the postmaster, but I’m sure some letters will be lost nonetheless.”

“With your engagement announced, I’m sure most will know you’ll soon be in town,” Mr. Luke said with a smirk. Daniel nodded, averting his eyes. The staff was certainly excited for a new lady of the house and the prospect of children soon. Daniel was trying not to show his uneasiness about it all to his butler.

“That is a good point,” Daniel said with a forced smile as he took another sip of his tea.

“You know, it is not uncommon for a man to be nervous when preparing to be married,” Mr. Luke spoke up just as Daniel was about to take a bite of breakfast sausage.

Daniel put down his fork and looked up at his butler, seeing the graying around his temples when his hair was normally black as coal. Dressed in his livery attire, Mr. Luke was always punctual and dressed for every occasion, even though there was rarely an occasion at Prescott Manor.

“I thank you for your advice,” Daniel said with a nod. Mr. Luke was always someone Daniel knew he could talk to if he needed guidance. Yet, he didn’t feel comfortable sharing his deep feelings with the man.

“Enjoy your breakfast, my Lord,” Mr. Luke said with a bow before leaving Daniel in peace.

Daniel focused on his breakfast, trying not to worry about his upcoming trip and all the events that would soon ensue in regard to his marriage. The event itself wouldn’t take place until the end of the Season in Town, a very traditional thing to do. Therefore, he had all the Season to hopefully get to know Margret better and if fate were in his favor, he would fall in love.

When Daniel was finished with his breakfast, having mopped up the running egg with his toast and consumed two cups of tea, he placed everything aside on the breakfast tray and turned his thoughts and focus to the letters of business on his desk. With a fresh stack of writing paper to his right, his inkpot in front of him, and a fine quill in his hand, he began addressing the letters.

Most of the letters were from his various tenants who had written him

informing him of the current state of their affairs. Most had overcome the winter months without any issues and now were preparing the land for the spring planting. However, there were two families who had lost loved ones during the winter, causing them to experience a grim turn of events. It was these tenants that Daniel would write and assure them they would be taken care of.

Daniel's father had taught him from a young age that it was the Earldom's tenants that allowed for their family to live a life of luxury. However, all of what they had would quickly go away if they didn't take care of their tenants in return. Daniel therefore made sure all the many tenants were taken care of so they could continue their way of life. It was a circle of sorts that Daniel felt he played an instrumental part in. If he kept up his part of the circle, his fortunes would continue to be strong.

Daniel ran his fingers through his dark brown hair as he turned his focus then to letters of social matters. With the news of his engagement, and soon travels to Town, he'd already started to receive letters of invitation to different social events, from balls to charity galas, that would take place at the popular Hyde Park. Daniel knew that being present at these events would do a great deal to sustain his reputation with the Bon Ton of Town – the elite of society who deemed whether a person was worthy of their title, and who could destroy a family with a slip of gossip that could circulate faster than water going down a drain.

The worst part about residing in Town was having to deal with the Ton and the rampant circulation of gossip. No one could be certain what was true or false when words were whispered between the wealthy women of society. But gossip was often published in the many papers of Town, and he wished never to be seen in the papers if it was not for his benefit. He'd worked hard to maintain his reputation and the name of Prescott. Therefore, he always made sure to be very careful when he was in Town.

As he sifted through the letters, he only focused on those from very elite families that had great reputations from what he'd learned from the papers and his business relations in Town. He would be appearing in society with Margret at his side and needed her to be introduced to the best of the best.

Daniel had plans for his future bride to ensure they had a good reputation at the beginning of their marriage. And though he didn't plan to spend much time in Town in the future, preferring the quiet of his countryseat, he wanted to leave Town with that good reputation intact.

Reputation had been very important to his father, and therefore was very important to Daniel. He strived to uphold the honor of his family in all ways that he could. This wedding would be the longest amount of time he'd been in Town since his father had passed away. It also meant a new chapter in his life. Though he liked to think that his life would continue as normal once he and Margret returned to Prescott Manor, he would also be mindful of his new wife and her needs and wants. As long as his family name stayed out of the gossip trains and the muck, he would be happy.

"My Lord," Mr. Luke spoke up as he came into his study. "A letter from Lord Chance." The butler came forth and produced the letter before bowing and removing the breakfast tray from his desk. Daniel waited until he was alone before he opened the letter and read it slowly aloud.

"Dear Lord Mavis,

What great joy I have as I write this letter. My family and I prepare for our journey to Town this morning and look forward to seeing you at the engagement ball in a fortnight. My wife and daughter very much look forward to the event and the joining of our families.

I have looked forward to this day with great anticipation ever since Margret was born. Joining our families together was much discussed with your parents, and I am pleased that you have committed to upholding this arrangement.

We look forward to seeing you in Town. Miss Harmony Chance, my niece, will also be traveling to Town with us. She will be debuting this year for the Season and will be present for the wedding as well.

Safe travels,

Lord Chance, Earl of Bentley.”

Daniel tried to think if he'd ever met Miss Harmony before. He knew that Lord Chance had a younger brother that was a baron of a small piece of land with only two tenants. Such was the fate of the younger brother, to inherit the lesser of the titles. When he was born, his mother said they didn't try for any other children because a younger brother would have little to inherit and would have been left only with the options of becoming a member of the cloth or joining the militia.

Of all the times he'd been to Bentley Manor, he hadn't met the Earl's niece. He had heard Margret speak of her before, that she was a close friend, and her father was very doting of her since her father didn't have much means. Other than that, Daniel had no thoughts surrounding the young lady and only hoped she would be of good

company.

Feeling no need to reply to the Earl's letter when they would soon meet in Town, Daniel rose from his desk, his morning routine of business finally coming to an end. Managing the Earldom was not a business that took all his time. After reviewing letters in the morning and penning about a dozen responses, he took to his favorite pastime.

With his riding boots on, Daniel picked up his leather gloves at the door along with his riding coat. The spring air still nipped when he went horseback riding. As the footman opened the front door for him, he stepped out in the late morning sun and enjoyed the feeling of the sunlight on his skin. England could be such a dreary place, with plenty of cloud cover, but today seemed to be very bright and sunny without a cloud in the sky.

"My Lord," the stable hand said in greeting as he came to the stables. Daniel was pleased to see that his chestnut gelding was already prepared and saddled for his late morning ride. He took the reins of the horse and thanked the stable hand before walking the horse out of the stable and towards the riding trail.

It was while horseback riding that Daniel felt like he was completely free. He pushed his gelding into a fast gallop along the riding path that wound around his estate. As they disappeared into a dense part of the forest, the sun was blocked, and the air became cool. Everything that concerned Daniel faded away. He wasn't dreading the upcoming wedding or being seen in Town for such an extended period of time. He didn't worry about the upcoming balls, galas, and trips to the theater to keep up appearances. The only thing that had Daniel's attention was the pace of the horse, the direction they were going, and what was coming up ahead.

Prescott Manor was host to an impressive landscape that had been a

painter's inspiration. With rolling hills, forests, and several ponds that were well stocked, Daniel was well pleased with his ability to keep up the grounds surrounding the manor. It was always pleasant to walk through them when the rose bushes that his mother had planted were in bloom. Daniel enjoyed his time at Prescott Manor and would be content if nothing every changed.

As Daniel eventually made his way back to the stables, needing to get ready to depart his home for Town, his thoughts turned back to Margret Chance. He hoped that her character had perhaps changed since the last time they had met during Christmas. Perhaps she had become more mature, of good character, and less materialistic.

Daniel could hope for the whole world, considering how serious a commitment marriage was. The last thing he wanted to do was regret his wife for the rest of his life and become a very miserable person. Family duty or not, Daniel wanted to maintain his happiness.

Chapter 2

Miss Harmony Chance stood in her cousin's bedchamber as she fussed with her lady's maid once more about the contents of her trunks. They were to leave in a few hours and Harmony thought her dear cousin Margret was being too particular. However, since they were both raised by fathers of different standing in society, Harmony deduced that Margret's behavior was based on her upbringing and doting parents.

"Miss Blane, please make sure my lavender velvet gown is packed. I must wear that to the first available ball," Margret said as she thumbed through her wardrobe. Harmony didn't think any more gowns could possibly fit in her trunks, and it seemed that everything that Margret owned had to accompany her to town.

"Lady Margret, your mother has already stated that you shall have new gowns once you arrive to Town and are fitted with the Season's trends," Miss Blane reminded her, having learned to be very patient with her charge.

"I suppose you're right," Margret said with a sigh. "Harmony, would you like to look through my gowns? We are of similar size and you would look rather handsome in them."

"Thank you, Margret," Harmony said with a smile. "But Lady Chance has informed me as well that I shall join in your fitting. Since I shall be debuting, she is determined I need to be the belle of every ball."

"Oh, Harmony, you are so lucky to be attending the Season as a single young lady," Margret said with sigh as she gave up the pursuit of

rearranging her trunks and joined Harmony sitting before the fireplace. Harmony was sipping a cup of lavender tea before their long journey to Town.

“I do consider myself lucky to be going to Town with your family,” Harmony agreed as she tucked back a loose strand of her blonde hair. “Uncle Philip is rather kind to invite me to attend with you.”

“But I shall not enjoy the Season as I did last year, because I am already intended. No man will give me his attention. It is rather hard to flirt and feel the romance in the air when I am not paid much attention,” Margret said with a sigh.

“What is Lord Mavis like anyways?” Harmony asked.

“Oh, Harmony, he is the most boring of all men I have ever met. Anytime we have dined with him and his family or vice versa, I have dreaded keeping company with the man. He talks of nothing but his business and state of affairs with Father and has no real experience with society. He stays home in the country and doesn’t frequent Town,” Margret said with disdain in her voice as she fidgeted with her fingers. Harmony knew Margret was very nervous about her upcoming marriage, even if she wasn’t willing to admit it.

“Does the man have a good reputation?” Harmony asked. Margret nodded in reply as she fixed herself a cup of tea. “And a good fortune?”

“One of the best, according to my father,” Margret replied before sipping on her tea. She frowned and added another cube of sugar and stirred it around before resuming to drink.

“Margret, you shall want for nothing when you are married to Lord Mavis. Though he might not be the best company, you’ll not have to fear about your future,” Harmony reasoned. Margret stilled as she looked at her cousin and then sighed as she set her cup aside.

“Forgive me, Harmony. I often forget our differences. From your perspective, you must think I’m being quite a snob towards Lord Mavis.”

“If I had such a good prospect, I would not speak the way you do,” Harmony reasoned. “I am the daughter of a Baron, the lowest of the classes in society. If I receive an offer of marriage from a viscount, that would be more than I could ever hope for.”

“Harmony, with my father adding to your dowry, you shall certainly become the bell of every ball and the debutante that everyone speaks of. I should set your eyes on an earl and not consider any others below that,” Margret said confidently, a smirk coming to her red lips. “If I cannot choose who I am to marry, then I shall ensure that you do.”

“That is very kind of you,” Harmony said as she placed her blue eyes on the rim of her porcelain teacup. “You have always shown me the greatest kindness.”

“Why of course,” Margret replied happily. “You are family, after all, and the closest thing I have to a sister.”

Harmony had never met Lord Mavis before, but from her cousin’s account, he was a dreadfully boring person with no attractive qualities besides his wealth. He was also ten years older than they both were.

“Alright darlings, let us be off,” Lady Chance said as she came into the bedchamber with an air of elegance. Both Aunt Fiona and Margret were always elegantly dressed. Even though they would be riding by carriage for the next few days to reach London, her aunt was dressed in a light blue gown of silk that almost looked like silver. On her shoulders was a white fox fur coat to protect from the chill of the spring air.

“Has the time come already?” Margret asked as she stood. “But Miss Blane is still packing my things.”

“Margret, your trunks need to be loaded on the carriage immediately if we are going to make good time to the first inn along our journey. Anything you might need, we can easily find in Town,” Aunt Fiona said happily, taking her daughter by the elbow and leading her from the room. “Come now, Harmony.”

Harmony stood without speaking as she set her cup aside and followed the Countess. Harmony also thought her aunt was rather beautiful with her long dark brown hair and her stance that was ever so poised. Having been fortunate enough to have a governess, Harmony had learned much about the ways of married women and how to be a proper lady to attract a suitable husband. However, Harmony had always struggled with how she should act and the natural way she felt.

As Harmony walked behind Aunt Fiona and Margret through the corridors of Bentley Manor, she couldn't help but notice all the finery. Having only visited the manor for special occasions and holidays, she always marveled at the splendor of it all.

The manor had recently been redone in the latest trends in society to include marble flooring throughout. New fabrics had been ordered for all the furniture so they could be reupholstered, and the curtains were taken down and changed to shades of greens and blues instead of the rich burgundies that used to grace the manor. Harmony had to say that the estate was much lighter than it used to be with the dark hardwood floors and the tones of red and gold.

She held onto the rail as they went down the steps of marble towards the front door where Uncle Philip was waiting for them. He was already wearing his riding cap and jacket, seeming to be anxious to arrive in Town as soon as possible. Harmony was simply happy to be joining the family in Town and be able to get the opportunity to attend the Season. This could very well be her only opportunity to secure her future with a suitable husband of good respect.

“Afternoon, ladies. Are we all set to make our way to Town?” Uncle Philip asked as they stepped out onto the landing and approached the front door.

“Margret’s things will be loaded momentarily,” Aunt Fiona explained. “It shouldn’t be too much longer.”

Uncle Philip gestured towards the footmen at the door and they set off towards Margret’s bedchamber in a hurry.

“I do want to make the Dancer Inn before nightfall,” Uncle Philip said as he turned his eyes towards Margret. “You must remember never to make your husband late when you marry.”

“Yes, Papa,” Margret replied as she lowered her eyes. Harmony knew that her aunt and uncle had no idea how Margret felt about her

upcoming marriage. Margret was doing her best to be the dutiful daughter, while inside she was dreading such a union with a man she did not love.

“Harmony, are you looking forward to the Season in Town?” Uncle Philip asked, catching her attention as she looked away from Margret.

“Yes, Uncle. I have heard many great things about London and look forward to seeing it for myself,” Harmony said with a smile.

“Town is not as glamorous as my wife no doubt made it sound to be,” Uncle Philip said with a chuckle. “It is a crowded place with much wealth as well as poverty. One must be careful about their surroundings.”

“Oh, Philip. You make Town sound like a dangerous place,” Aunt Fiona tsked, shaking her head. “London is a wonderful, bustling place. There is such convenience, and many wonderful families to dine with on a regular basis. Anything can happen in a place like that.”

“Let us be off,” Margret spoke up, her voice stiff.

“Good idea. No point talking about the place when we have yet to leave the house,” Uncle Philip said as he led the way to the carriage. He was kind enough to help all the women up into the carriage before stepping up himself and getting comfortable next to his wife. They waited patiently for the last of the trunks to be tied on before the driver flicked the reins and set them forward towards London.

There was peace and quiet in the carriage for a bit as it was led down

the lane towards the main road. Harmony looked off in the distance, observing the vastness of the Earl's lands. She knew not to compare such a place to her own abode. Harmony just kept reminding herself of all she had to be grateful for. Her uncle was taking her under his guardianship for the Season in the hopes she would marry well.

Harmony had no memory of her mother, having been told she died when she was very young. Her father had gone to great lengths to provide her care and all that she needed to be raised into a fine young woman. Harmony could easily say that kindness ran in the family. Though Uncle Philip had inherited the Earldom, he had always made sure his brother and niece were well taken care of.

Growing up, Harmony had had the opportunity to learn all sorts of things from reading, to writing, to a bit of the Italian language that her father still remembered from his own upbringing, as well as how to paint and draw. She'd been given the opportunity to learn to play the piano like Margret, but she cared little for the practice, though she loved to listen to music.

Of all the pastimes that Harmony participated in, it would be taking long walks to gather her thoughts that she enjoyed most. From a young age, her father had always complimented her on her ability to critically think. Often sharing in the daily happenings of the estate, Mr. Chance always kept Harmony up to date on what was going on with their lands and the condition of their two tenants.

Since most of the land was used for farming, together they would discuss crops, growing seasons, and the best markets to sell their produce. Her father always included her in all things, allowing Harmony to gain a better understanding of the world.

"My darling Harmony," her father had told her before she'd left for her uncle's estate on the other side of the village, *"I am hoping that you will*

truly enjoy your time in Town. I hope that one day you will be married, but mindful of the gentlemen that will pay you attention. You are truly beautiful like your mother, and you will gain much attention.

“Some of the attention will be good and for your favor. You will be invited to so many parties. But women will be jealous of you and perhaps seek to ruin you by spreading gossip. You must never be caught alone with a gentleman. It is tragic how these things can happen to one who is not used to the ways of Town.”

“Father, I promise not to do anything that might be even considered scandalous,” Harmony had replied. He’d coughed then, blaming the spring allergies for plaguing him so. *“Father, make sure to drink the tonic the apothecary gave you. Your allergies will get the best of you.”*

“Fear not, my child. I’ll be well. Make sure to write me often so I may know how you are faring in Town.”

“Of course, Papa,” Harmony had replied before kissing her father’s cheek and making her way to her uncle’s care.

Now, as the carriage rocked like a boat at sea as it was pulled along the main roads that would eventually lead them to Town, Harmony thought about the promises she’d made her father. She was to be on her best behavior and do her best to find a suitable match. By the end of the Season, Harmony wanted to be married to a good man much like Margret, but perhaps she could fall in love along the way.

“Ladies, we shall have the seamstress come visit the townhouse the day after we are settled,” Aunt Fiona spoke up, perhaps finding the silence of the ride less comfortable than the rest of them. Harmony’s focus was taken away from the scenery.

"I'm curious to know what the latest fashions are," Margret said with a smile, always having a taste for the finer things in life.

"Fabrics are going to be so important to choose," Aunt Fiona declared in an excited voice. "Cream silk for the finer balls, and layered greens and blues for the more common balls. Something a little acentric for the opera house, and modest gowns for walking at the park."

"That all sounds wonderful," Margret replied as she leaned back and took a deep breath.

"You should look your best this Season," Uncle Philip said to his daughter. "This is the time before you are married and start having children of your own." Harmony watched as Margret's smile faded at the mention of her marriage.

"But of course, I wouldn't want to outshine Harmony," Margret said, turning the conversation around. "She still needs to have all the advantages of our family to secure a suitable match."

"Yes, of course," Uncle Philip said with a nod. "You shall certainly learn quite a lot in Town."

"You are very handsome, Harmony," Aunt Fiona added. "I will not be surprised if your beauty attracts many suitors and invitations to social functions. Just remember your manners and you'll have no difficulties."

“Yes, Aunt,” Harmony quickly replied. She wanted to reassure her aunt and uncle, just like her father, that she would always choose what was best. That if she received an offer of marriage from a fine gentleman, that she’d be quick to accept such an offer.

Harmony tucked a strand of her blonde hair that hung in ringlets beside her face back behind her ear as she focused on the scenery once more. With her riding cloak tucked around her, she could practically fall asleep with the gentle rocking of the carriage. The bench upon which she sat was rather plush with soft fabric. Everything she happened to touch in the carriage felt soft enough to rest upon.

“Harmony, it’s important that you know about some of the most prominent families in town,” Aunt Fiona said, getting Harmony’s attention once more. “There are several other earls in town and their families. We should happen to dine with them on occasion, and there are a few with sons, or who are eligible themselves.”

“Are any of them handsome?” Margret asked with a giggle.

“I suppose you could say that,” Aunt Fiona replied. Harmony knew that her aunt and cousin frequently spoke of gossip. She knew that the both of them had a wealth of knowledge when it came to life in Town. “But you shouldn’t pay too much attention over the looks of men when you are spoken for. Let Harmony have the fun this Season.”

Margret nodded her head and looked out her window. Harmony could tell she was stunned into quiet by the comment when she normally could talk an entire evening away with her mother. Harmony wished there were something she could do to cheer her cousin up, or to save her from the predicament she found herself in.

“Margret, you must be of sound judgement for me,” Harmony spoke up. “I shall be attending the Season for the first time; visiting Town for the first. You must be my chaperone and escort through all of this so that I might make wise decisions.”

“Of course, dear cousin,” Margret said with a small smile on her lips as she looked at Harmony and took her gloved hand in hers. “I shall be with you every step of the way and will tell you more about the families and which ones to avoid.” They giggled over this, even causing Uncle Philip to chuckle. Harmony wasn’t sure what was going to be in store for her in Town, but she was certainly looking forward to it.

Want to read the rest of the story? [Check out the book on Amazon!](#)

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